

Brides of Christ

Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico



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Introduction



The fascination that women's convents and conventual life exercise in today's students and readers seems at odds with the highly secular orientation of our daily life. However, very few contemporary women would choose a life of strict enclosure and total dedication to the discipline of prayer and concentration on the salvation of the soul. The interest seems to be based on the appeal elicited by the centrality of faith of those women who chose conventual life, and the realization that convents were the only gender-specific institutions in the past that allowed women to carry out an almost independent life in niches created for their exclusive use. While not all the mystique of religious life corresponds to the reality of how nuns lived their own lives, it still had an inner strength that sustained it for centuries and maintained it as an option for thousands of women throughout centuries. In Mexico, these institutions began to be founded in the mid-sixteenth century. By the end of the colonial period, there were fifty-seven convents, the last founded in 1811, as the political process that led to independence from Spain had already begun.¹

Women's convents were part of the Spanish and European cultural transfer to the New World. Christianity in its Roman Catholic expression was represented by these architectural symbols of a religion imposed over a partially evangelized land. They also represented an understanding of assumed gender qualities that made women repositories of a special form of spirituality, regarded as desirable in the building of a new society. There was a place for convents in the social and economic milieu of towns in Spanish America and New Spain—as Mexico was then called. With the foundation of cities, and specifically a capital for the new viceroyalty, the new settlers sought the establishment of women's convents as a mark of spiritual and social distinction, as well as a place for the protection of those women whom they considered endangered by the new social circumstances. As convents were founded, built, expanded, and embellished, they graced the streets of Mexico City, and the growing number of provincial cities, with their sometimes austere, sometimes ornate architecture. Throughout two and a half centuries, they employed myriads of skilled and unskilled workers, artisans and artists, who left behind tangible expressions of a period's religious sensibility. As institutions, they survived through an astute combination of economic donations and investments. Many devotions and religious rituals centered on their churches, where altars dedicated to patron saints, Mary, and Jesus Christ became the emblematic inspiration of the faithful. The physical but hidden proximity of the women living in the adjacent cloisters infused nunneries with an aura of respect and mystery that was lacking in male convents, inasmuch as monks were part of the world, and their own visibility in the streets made them familiar and accessible.

Before the twentieth century there was no general history of these institutions. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of them had their own chronicles. The foundational process and the lives of notable nuns were the core of those narratives, while in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, local historians created a corpus of information centering on some orders or given convents.² When Josefina Muriel published her *Conventos de Monjas en Nueva España* in 1946, she opened a new chapter in academic history.³ Muriel's work addressed all nuns and the nature of the institutions in which they lived and created a world of their own, although her work was centered on the city of Mexico. In 1994, Muriel published another landmark with her *Cultura femenina novohispana*, a survey of the works written by women in colonial Mexico. She successfully demonstrated that women wrote in many genres and that they had a place in the construction of viceregal culture.⁴

More recently, a significant number of articles and several books in Spanish and English have begun to fill gaps in these women's histories. In Mexico, Rosalva Loreto López and Manuel Ramos Medina have written monographs on the nuns of Puebla and the Carmelite Order, respectively, while Nuria Salazar has worked indefatigably in the archives of the convent of Jesús María, its material culture, and other aspects of its conventual history.⁵ Their work is based on careful research covering the foundation and material life of women in the convents, as well as the symbolic and religious meaning of their writings and devotional lives, and anchoring these institutions firmly in the social and economic life of New Spain. Sister Pilar Foz y Foz has written an in-depth study of the teaching Order of Mary, which opened its first convent-school in Mexico in 1754.⁶ More recently, Asunción Lavrin and Loreto López have explored nuns' devotional and spiritual lives and the religious culture of the viceroyalty.⁷ Jacqueline Holler has surveyed the entire institutional and social landscape of nuns and *beatas* in the sixteenth century.⁸ Margaret Chowning turned to a provincial convent and has followed the complex political negotiations and eventual outcome of the attempt to reform the observance of the convent of La Purísima Concepción, in San Miguel el Grande.⁹ The effort to establish common grounds with Spanish conventual tradition has crystallized in several international conferences, and in monographs that have added depth to the history of nunneries, although comparative studies are yet to be produced.¹⁰

In English and Spanish, the lion's share in the writings on nuns has been done by literary critics, who have mostly focused on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The vast number of works dedicated to Sor Juana precludes any generalization, but I wish to acknowledge the foundational works of Georgina Sabat de Rivers.¹¹ Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlauf gave the literary field a broad vision of the conventual writing ties between Spain and Spanish America with the publication of *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* in 1989, in which they took a sweeping look at nuns' writings in Spanish America and Spain, addressing their specific qualities as expressions of professed women's sensibilities and aptitudes. The analysis of religious sensibilities as expressed in nuns' writings is also the concern of Kristine Ibsen.¹² Recent publications indicate a new direction toward the study of lesser known conventual writers. Kathleen Myers' and Amanda Powell's intense study of Augustinian Sor María de San José's life and work benefits from literary and historical analysis, revealing the possibilities open to mixing textual analysis and its historical context.¹³ Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela has reviewed and analyzed the meaning of several historical events and personal writings as venues for understanding their cultural meaning.¹⁴ Biographies of nuns and institutions offer much promise to historians and literary critics, as indicated by Kathleen Ross's study of Sigüenza y Góngora's history of Jesús María convent.¹⁵

Another figure recently rediscovered is that of Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, a prolific writer of devotional works in eighteenth-century

Puebla. Jennifer Eich has aptly traced the literary biography of Sor María Anna, underlining the interest in the expression of personal spirituality in the eighteenth century. Nuns' writings are part of the broader analysis of the Mexican feminine intellectual ethos carried out by Jean Franco.¹⁶ The impetus gained by this focus on religious women as subjects and objects of the biographical genre has injected new life into colonial literature and history. Following that trend, Lavrin and Loreto have edited two volumes of writings by nuns and *beatas* in Mexico and Spanish America.¹⁷

The preceding brief survey of the historiography of women's convents in colonial Mexico indicates a growing interest in the topic; there are numerous areas of historical and literary interest that bear further investigation and interpretation. Regional archives contain important documentation waiting for institutional study, as illustrated by Margaret Chowning's work on the convent of La Purísima Concepción in San Miguel el Grande. In Mexico City, Alicia Bazarte Martínez, Enrique Tovar Esquivel, and Martha A. Tronco have recovered important materials from the Hieronymite convents in Mexico and Puebla.¹⁸ I have published many articles on the analysis of conventual finances and their ties to the communities. It is a topic that I chose not to treat in depth in this work, and I trust that readers interested in it will find these articles elsewhere.

Of the areas in need of further historical development, those of life within the convent and the spiritual meaning of conventual life for the professed nuns are critical to complement the new wave of historical and literary studies. As a historical subject, nunneries pose a multiplicity of questions. This work addresses some of them, but from the very specific angle of the inner sanctum of the convent. My intention in this work is to follow a different and as yet understudied aspect of nuns' lives: the path of their lives, beginning with the decision to profess, to become part of the religious community. I seek to understand the rewards they expected to receive, or believed they had received; the routines of their daily and material life; and their interaction with spiritual directors, with each other, and with their ecclesiastical superiors. Their devotional practices were an intrinsic part of their lives and should not be neglected, whether expressed as rituals or in their writings. I also delve into the internal hierarchy and government of the convent and their confrontation with sexuality, sickness, and death. In other words, I am interested in the overall experience of being a nun.

This ambitious goal poses several challenges, and perhaps the most demanding is to avoid being anachronistic in interpretation. As much as possible, I have tried to see the nuns' world through their own eyes and in their own terms. This has meant using their own writings, the works of their hagiographers and ecclesiastic authorities, and those of their contemporaries. While being analytical, I have treated with empathy the views that the historical actors held as valid and truthful for themselves. I understand and expose the "inscripting" and encoding that sermons, biographies, and autobiographies carried within themselves, and hope to have made them clear to the reader while remaining respectful of their worldview.

This study focuses mostly on the convents of the cities of Mexico City and Puebla. The rules that governed nunneries established inescapable uniformities from which we can infer that the features of daily and personal life here described and analyzed were common to most convents in New Spain. I cover mostly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a much smaller input for the sixteenth century, because most conventual foundations were carried out after 1600. Archival sources for the mid- and late-colonial period and the central areas of the viceroyalty remain the core of historical research. Students of colonial Mexico know that the archives of nunneries were appropriated by the state in the 1860s, and while a considerable part of them was deposited in the National Archive of the Nation, many were lost forever. The holdings of the convent of Jesús María in Mexico City are available, although not in their entirety, in the archives of the Secretariat of Health and Welfare. Parts of the materials of Franciscan nunneries of the city of Querétaro are preserved in the Franciscan archives in Celaya; other Franciscan nunneries' papers are available at the National Library and the library of the Museum of Anthropology and History. Provincial archives conserve important collections of regional convents. There are still a significant number of untapped historical materials available for study, especially in the provincial cities.

The spiritual prestige of convents was based on the projection of the image of nuns as privileged persons. The brides of Christ, the chosen ones, were those who could stand the rigor of a disciplined life without sex, and devote themselves not only to their own personal salvation, but also to help and benefit others with their prayers. Such prayers had a special value in the period under review, and people understood their relation to nunneries as one of exchange of material support for the spiritual benefits derived from the salvific mediation of the brides of Christ. This mystique was in the minds of those who helped create these institutions and those who wished to profess in them. Chapter 1 defines the social and economic milieu in which female convents developed. As Christianity was transported to a non-European environment, it underwent a transformation that marked those who aspired to live its message as members of a very special devotional community. The convents became a social and economic filter that rejected the newly converted indigenous women and benefited a relatively small number of chosen females of Spanish descent. The exaggeration of the qualification of purity of race and legitimacy of birth left an indelible mark on the development of these institutions, and was wholly absorbed, accepted, and enacted by the families of the professants and the professants themselves. The spiritual motivations for profession developed within that peculiar socioeconomic framework as a hothouse flower available only to those of impeccable pedigree.

Chapter 1 also tackles the difficult questions of understanding why a woman would like to become a nun. Because we live in a highly secular world, the reasons behind the decision to profess are a puzzling issue to us. Is there any logical explanation for a choice that entailed living the rest of one's life behind walls, engaged in pious devotions in expectation of the salvation of one's soul? Put in those terms alone, the distance in sensibility and the great changes that have affected the quality of women's lives make it hard to explain or understand the existence of nunneries or the wish to become a nun. Traveling back in time and placing ourselves in a period still infused with a profound belief in the proposition that a celibate and enclosed life, dedicated to prayers and matters of the spirit, was as important and possibly a better life than in the secular world, eases our mind into an appreciation and acceptance of a worldview that regarded that choice as respectable and even desirable.

Accountability for life in the convent mixes social and personal factors. At the personal level we must acknowledge religious vocation. It is wrong to assume that all women who professed as nuns did so as a result of family or social pressures. We cannot ignore the educational, social, and economic circumstances that pointed to the convent as a valid option for those women who could access it. The emotional draw of religion in the early modern world involved individuals and countries. Wars of religion were waged in Europe while a spiritual "conquest" was waged in Spanish America. Reform, attack, and defense of religion were hot issues and buzz words in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More than simple figures of speech, they were issues lived intensely at the personal level.

This cultural baggage was transferred from Spain to its overseas possessions. Female convents, as institutions emblematic of a new triumphal faith, offered a venue to express the reality of Roman Catholicism, as well as the reality facing women of Spanish descent in a period of struggle and new beginnings. Convents offered solutions appropriate for their times and the circumstances of the New World. They were not meant for the neophytes but, rather, for those who would represent Spanish culture in the construction of a new society. They reinforced not only the self-esteem of the European settlers, but also their plans to create a new society, which, albeit different from the one they left behind, would be built on similar cultural foundations. Thus, the arguments expressed to found new convents and to restrict admittance to the socio-racial elite were a response to the Spanish-oriented mentality confronted with a world still somewhat unintelligible, but felt as threatening enough to demand protection to those regarded as vulnerable.

The theme of protection runs deeply in the petitions for new foundations and did not seem to run dry even in the late-eighteenth century, because attitudes about the so-called intrinsic weakness of the female sex did not change much through two centuries. On the other hand, it is not naïve to accept the religious motivations voiced by those who professed and those who helped them to carry out their ambition by founding convents and endowing novices. In fact, only by paying close attention to the spirituality of the sixteenth century, and especially the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can we hope to come close to understanding the lives of nuns. While I focus on spiritual, devotional, and ritual practices in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 10, this work is entirely based on the assumption that spiritual meanings imbued all personal and communal activities within the cloisters.

In New Spain, all social life was permeated by the spirit of practiced religiosity. For a woman, the acquisition of faith and piety was a process based on a multiplicity of sources: home prayers and observance, the practices of devotion demanded by the Roman Catholic Church through the ministration of confessors, and learning about the living examples of saints and holy persons through the teaching imparted by preachers and confessors. Community celebrations, such as processions and saints' feasts, also created a naturalized atmosphere of religiosity. As convents for women were founded, their mere presence was a constant reminder of the opportunities they offered for those who wished to live a life fully committed to religion. Some examples of miscarried vocations are summoned here, but they are not brought to disprove piety; rather, they are to reaffirm it in the majority of those who professed, as well as to illustrate the misuse of social and familial forces.

Chapter 2 addresses the period of novitiate or apprenticeship of religious life. Little attention has been paid to this crucial period in the formation of the religious life. Testing the novice's vocation and her ability to adjust to the discipline of the convent were necessary steps before she took the final and irrevocable vows. Because proving herself to be a "good" nun took any professed sister an entire lifetime, the novitiate served as a trial run of what awaited her and as an opportunity for the community to learn of her potential. From all accounts the novitiate was a tough experience. The physical and spiritual discipline inflicted on the novice was aimed at detaching her emotionally and intellectually from her previous life and the world. Teaching the new life may have been a compassionate process, but the few narratives from teachers and students that have reached us suggest that the intensity of focus demanded by conventual life was not easy to acquire or to impart. Obedience and humility were essential elements of the novitiate, but affective bonds were also possible, especially because it was important to establish an understanding that the "family" of professed nuns was the only family that really mattered in this world. In Chapters 4 and 5 we will encounter some of the problems that made this ideal difficult to achieve, but the purpose of the novitiate was to train the future nuns in the pursuit of the model life believed to be achievable in the cloisters. It was also during this period that the relationship with confessors and spiritual directors began to take shape. As the most meaningful and fundamental associations in a nun's life, the relationship with them is traced throughout different stages in her life, with a variety of nuances and personal significance for both.

Chapter 3 develops several of the spiritual themes that permeated and guided life in the convent. While a full book-length manuscript would be necessary to explain the many nuances of spirituality within the convent, it is essential to analyze the meaning of vows, devotional practices, and the extraordinary power of the faith that sustained the nuns' piety. The foundational promise of conventual life was the vows made in the final profession. They contained the initial spiritual message of the uniqueness of women dedicated entirely to religious life and the discipline of their commitment. Clausturation was gender-specific, as it did not apply to men. The vows of celibacy, obedience, and poverty had been developed throughout the Middle Ages and reiterated at the Council of Trent, which also made clausturation a nonnegotiable qualifier of life for women in religion. The immutability of the vows defied the challenge of change, and defined what was the essential message that bound women to their expected behavior within the convent.

The vows ensured the permanency of key aspects of religious life essential to its survival. The expectation that conventual activities and worship would not change abruptly sustained the discipline prescribed by the rules of each order. Discipline meant order and regularity as the bases of higher pursuits expressed in the great variety of devotional themes sustaining the spiritual life of nuns and convents. I was obliged to focus on a small number of those that appeared fundamental in most convents for more than two hundred years. The centrality of the love of God and the worship of the Passion of Christ and his sacred heart is evident in the writings of the nuns themselves, not just in the prescribed ceremonial and worship activities. The revitalization of the concept of being the bride of Christ in a holy marriage is also an important feature of the period under review.¹⁹ Christ the groom and object of unrequited love was the companion of all his brides. They were expected to enjoy his commitment to them, as well as suffer for him and with him. The depth of this relationship should not be underestimated. It was the backbone of female spirituality, as taught, received, believed, and expressed in nuns' writings. Mary, understandably, also occupied an important place in Counter-Reformation Catholicism. She had a special resonance in communities of women who saw a gender affinity in her multiple roles of mother and intercessor. Many of the nuns were also visionaries. Visions are no longer castaways in the history of mentalities or culture. One does not need to believe that the visions actually happened to understand that they were embedded in the expression of the spiritual experience. Their verifiability of visions is less important than their meaning as personal and social assumptions about the sensitivity of women to experience them, and today we can use them as metaphors that open our understanding of the religious *gnosis*.

Life within the convent unfolded into many discrete units, each one dedicated to specific activities and all of them carefully inscribed in time. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 address a variety of daily life occurrences. It is hard to capture all the fine details of conventual life, but in these chapters I strive to cover some key issues, such as the establishment of order and hierarchy among the sisters, the mundane but real issues of community management, the painful experience of sickness and the conceptualization of death, and the surreptitious presence of sexuality within the cloisters.

The internal structure and order of the religious community is followed in Chapter 4. At the ring of daily bells, the community knew what activities to perform and what routine to follow. Hierarchy and obedience were the twin pillars that sustained the social framework of the convent. The internal discipline of the convent was built on tasks and responsibilities assigned to the members of the community through a system of periodical elections and appointments. The rules of governance and the ties established among nuns, however, were ultimately dependent on their male authorities, who while mostly exercising a watchful eye on the convents without much interference, could, and did, exercise their power to change the course of observance in the convents. Among the male authorities, the spiritual director was a very strong influence on the life of the nun, and personal governance began with him. These male figures exercised control over the nuns' spiritual lives in ways that transcended their role as a source of religious guidance. They were the repository of the nuns' innermost thoughts, and they were trusted and valuable advisors in all that mattered in religion. The bond between confessor and spiritual daughter unfolded in many ways. His advice was addressed to her observance of the rules; her behavior as a person within the convent, and her adjustment to religious life; the benefits of religious practice; and the eventual salvation of her soul. Such a charged relationship was sometimes satisfactory and sometimes painfully uncomfortable for the nun. Their spiritual writings reveal the complexities of their relationship with their confessor about which there is still much to be explored, far more than can be hinted in Chapter 10.

For the nun, however, her community and her own female superiors were the most immediate reality, and in Chapter 4 I have dwelled on the role of the abbess as the most important authority figure in the community and a good yardstick to measure the degree of worldliness and power involved in the

government of a convent. “Worldliness” is not meant as a lack of spirituality, but an affirmation of the capabilities that women could develop once they were given free reign over their daily lives. When nuns assumed the tasks that were largely denied to women outside the convent, their competence in performing them demonstrated how contemporary restraints on the majority of women stymied their ability to engage in meaningful occupations. The much touted “freedom” experienced in the cloisters was not altogether focused on spiritual objectives. It was also freedom to undertake responsibilities. Keeping the accounts of the convent, administering and governing a body of sometimes several hundred individuals, and observing its ceremonial life were learned activities that became natural to nuns as they exercised them. As well, rituals and ceremonial acts help us to understand how through their metaphorical meaning convents and nuns rose above the mundanity of daily life.

In Chapter 5, I pursue other details of daily life that speak to the permeability of the cloisters and its interdependence with the community outside its walls. Prohibitions to engage with the world were ineffective in keeping a strict separation of the presumably closed gardens of virgins and the seculars beyond their walls. In fact, such separation was theoretical, a fact acknowledged in the very core of religious teachings, which warned of the struggle and perils involved in the coexistence of spirit and flesh, cloister and lay community. Beyond the abstractions of the spirit lay the human needs of the institution and its inhabitants. It was not totally incongruent to understand the humanity of Christ when humans devoted to his worship had to bear the infirmities of the body and the needs of their daily existence. The latter involved surviving times of economic stress, allocating funds for the needs of the professed as well as the needs of worship, procuring a personal space of their own by purchasing and furnishing cells, dealing with the convent’s administrator, and litigating over property with seculars for the benefit of the community. The administration of income was of the utmost concern for prelates as well as for the nuns, and an occasional point of friction between them. All the details of conventual life such as cuisine and needlework were not only part of prescribed chores, but were also means of spiritualizing those “womanly” activities as they were performed. The femininity of nuns pervaded their activities in ways not present in male communities.

Daily life could not be carried out in most convents without the aid of servants and even slaves, whose lives remain largely in shadows, reflecting the social distinctions that separated the brides of Christ from their helpers in this world. Although the personal lives of servants are difficult to recover, their presence became a bone of contention among prelates who wished a return to imagined simpler Christian lives. The disputes over servants and protégées stretched into the late eighteenth century and were never resolved. In general, the assumed different “nature” of the New World and its female elite was the argument wielded by the nuns to defend the large number of servants that remained an irritant to the ecclesiastical authorities. As stated, a codification of class and ethnic separation prevailed in the cloisters, and it is somewhat ironic that, in a fascinating twist of colonial piety, some of these humble women gained respectability as embodiments of a sanctity they were not expected to possess.²⁰

In Chapter 6, I address the issue of health, sickness, and the meaning of death as part of the human experience of nuns. The rudimentary understanding of the source of diseases, and the knowledge that sickness would most likely be followed by death, presented the nuns and their confessors with the issue of how best to prepare the soul to cope with both, and life beyond death. As spiritual diaries show, concern for the souls of the departed and their own occupied an important place in the prayers and rituals of nuns, but material comfort for those affected by sickness was part of the charity they were assumed to exercise. Nuns suffered from diseases similar to those of the rest of the population, and while the status of medical knowledge did not guarantee them a better diagnosis and treatment, the care they received in the infirmaries was possibly superior to those of the population at large. While not confirmed, a trend toward a longer life among nuns is apparent.

Not surprisingly, disease was regarded as God’s test to try one’s character. The sickness and the suffering of these virginal brides of Christ became a theme of discussion in their biographies, which exposed their weakened bodies to the curiosity of the readers of conventual chronicles, as a source of inspiration to those who read them. The use of the body as a venue to construct piety suggests how important links between the physical and the spiritual were in Counter-Reformation lore. It is under that light that flagellation of the body and denial of the flesh must be understood. However, the rhetoric of body flagellation and the debasement of the body were part of the pious rituals of some extraordinary nuns, and they were not the customary practices for most professed women. Death, on the other hand, was common to all—and was understood as the final redemption of worldly ties and the return to the beloved spiritual motherland where the soul would meet its redeemer. A firm belief in purgatory as an intermediate place where souls paid for their sins supported an intensive apparatus of prayers on their behalf. Death and the afterlife were surrounded by the most solemn liturgies and were the source of legendary stories on the supernatural qualities of relics left by the most exemplary sisters. The interlocking of sickness, death, and the fate of the soul is one of the richest facets of colonial spirituality.

The body of the virginal bride of Christ was also the locus of contention of the nuns’ spiritual caretakers. Masculinity, femininity, and the sexuality emerging from the close relationships forged between nuns and their confessors is the theme developed in Chapter 7. The celibacy imposed upon the clergy, translated into chastity vows for friars and nuns, was a hotly contested and debated issue throughout the Middle Ages. The Council of Trent reiterated the principle of celibacy, but effective control over the sexual behavior of clergy and the male regular orders in the New World was lacking. While it was easier for a recluse woman to sustain her vow of chastity and remain physically virginal, her sexuality could emerge through unchaste thoughts and behavior, and the most likely occasions of that emergence were those shared with confessors. Potentially subversive situations could also develop from “devotional” visitations of men to nuns, a fashionable “courtly” behavior in the seventeenth century, but in this chapter I study several forms of courtship and sexually charged situations of “solicitation” of favors from nuns by their confessors that challenged the mystical marriage to Christ. If the details of the many ways of courtship are in themselves of social interest, one should not forget that the foundational concept of love between Christ and his bride, explained in Chapter 3, was under siege whenever a male member of the church approached a nun. This behavior elicited condemnation and punishment from ecclesiastic authorities, as it was their duty to punish each other for such transgressions; but no amount of denunciation succeeded in uprooting such practices. Female monastic sexuality will always remain half hidden under the veils of modesty, but it existed, either repressed or demurely expressed. There is no base, however, for popular lore about unbridled sexuality in the numeries. Real transgressions resulting in sexual encounters were few and have been documented. It is the more subtle forms of sexual expression that we must address, as they emerge from the relationship of “father” and daughter in the spiritual realm. The corruption of this relationship took many forms, and I explore several of them in an attempt to highlight the human context of what was assumed to be a spiritual relationship. The connection between spirit and flesh is nowhere more evident than in the very personal expression of physical attraction between the sexes that could flourish in the convents.

Having enforced racial discrimination against indigenous women—and all mixed bloods—the foundation of several convents for indigenous women in the eighteenth century marked a notable departure from social practice covered in Chapter 8. Were the foundations due to the changing winds of the Enlightenment or any other intellectual change in this century? Founded in 1724, the first convent for indigenous women does not seem to represent any social shift in the vision of the Indian as a potential pious and spiritualized human being. The Church remained indifferent to this possibility throughout the seventeenth century, and the foundation of Corpus Christi for Indian noblewomen seems to have been the result of a fortuitous and sudden viceregal impulse. However, once founded, both elite white males and noble Indians seemed to have found a strong cause to espouse while, at the same time, the

possibility of Indian nuns released the anxiety of those who opposed the elevation of indigenous females to the exalted position so far occupied solely by the white brides of Christ. The debate about the appropriateness of Indian women for the religious state was based less on any natural or rational rights owed to them as Christians than on their having achieved the maturity and exemplarity of behavior, as well the mettle required to observe the most stringent rules of monastic life. Disregarding the fact that many transgressions to the assumed exemplarity of white nuns had been quoted and criticized by male ecclesiastical authorities in the preceding centuries, the intellectual and religious bar for the admission of Indians to the cloister was raised high by those who claimed that Indians lacked it. Conversely, those who supported the aspirations of Indian brides for Christ relied heavily on the assumption that they could achieve traditional virtues expressed by the monastic female vows. There was nothing “revolutionary” in the acceptance of indigenous nuns from a spiritual viewpoint. As nuns, indigenous women aspired to, and exercised in practice, the Iberian hagiographical models without any hint of orthodox deviation. Nonetheless, the opening of a space in the Church so long denied to them marks a departure from the past and shows the willingness of the Church to become a more inclusive institution. To the extent that religious profession was still regarded as a privilege, the indigenous women who acceded to it brought honor and distinction to their communities. It was this circumstance that the indigenous elite accepted with joy.

Another important chapter in the history of Mexican nunneries took place in the second half of the century over the acceptance of *vida común*. Under this form of observance, nuns would eat in a refectory sharing communal meals, give up their personal servants, and dismiss girls and seculars living in the cloister. In Mexico, the diocesan authorities engaged in a process of ecclesiastical reform under the assumption that *vida común* was inspired in earlier and “truer” forms of Christianity. The attempt to overhaul the organization, administration, and observance of nunneries began in 1765 in the bishopric of Puebla, initiated by Bishop Francisco Fabián y Fuero. He was later joined in the effort by the Archbishop of Mexico and several other bishops and received the support of Viceroy Marquis de Croix and Antonio María de Bucareli. For the next fifteen years, nuns and their male prelates engaged in a battle of wills, mostly carried out in the key cities of Puebla and Mexico, but affecting most nunneries in the viceroyalty.

I present this process as one of gender contestation because even though the reform was understood as a religious issue, it was characterized by the explicit use of gendered terms by all those involved. It was a plan designed by men and followed a masculine understanding of the duties and needs of cloistered women that totally disregarded the voice and feelings of the women involved. These men intended to dismantle the religious identity and cloister culture that nuns had developed throughout two hundred years, alleging that they offered a rational plan to clean up the perceived deviations of monastic observance. Their plan denied the women’s arguments that their form of observance had been blessed by previous religious authorities and nurtured and sustained their form of spiritual needs. To be sure, some of the deviations criticized by the prelates were real and contradicted the nunneries’ own rules, but many of the “irregularities” criticized by the male prelates represented adaptations to the lifestyle of a different continent and a different society—at least, the nuns argued that they did.

Given the abundance of official documentation generated by this prolonged contest and the many nuances in the positions assumed by the clergy, the regular prelates, the royal officials, the viceroys, and the nuns themselves, I offer a tight summary of events. Other historians have rendered local accounts and more may do so in the future, given the fact that this is the best-known defiance of women in colonial Mexico. My emphasis is on the assumption of unconditional obedience that the men expected, their surprise at not receiving it, and their relentless persistence in securing it. This reform plan was the brainchild of a small group of male ecclesiastics, and once they were transferred elsewhere, the milder royal interpretation of the desirability of changes prevailed. Subsequent prelates simply reminded the nuns of their obligation to follow *vida común*, but there was no real transformation of the style of observance in most convents. Thus, what this rather ephemeral, although intense, event allows us to understand is how, under duress, the brides of Christ could deploy tactics of resistance that belied the docility their spiritual fathers ascribed to them. This outburst was short and not at all revolutionary, despite all the energy spent on it by adversarial groups. All these nuns desired was to continue living in their traditional fashion and remain in control of their own institutions.

A history of nunneries should not be without personal narratives or writings that create a spiritual tradition in the body of the community. The importance of women’s own narratives is paramount to understanding how they perceived their own world, especially when that world was, by definition, a community that had enclosed itself to perpetuate a lifestyle in the pursuit of a spiritual objective. In Chapter 10, I focus on some of the personal works of nuns to encourage the reader to meditate on some of the previous chapters and return to some of their themes guided by the written words of the sisters themselves.

While reading was an obvious practice for the professed, what we can say about this practice is limited due to the scarcity of inventories of the books they owned or read. On the other hand, writing has left enough tracks to guide us into the multiple facets of their thoughts. Writing “business” letters was an institutional practice still in need of academic evaluation. Collections of personal letters are harder to come by. In Chapter 10 I focus on the writings of a spiritual nature because they enrich our understanding of the most personal aspect of religious life. Nuns had to be careful of what they said about themselves and their spiritual experiences, given the supervision exercised by male ecclesiastics. The same authorities, however, encouraged them to write about their innermost feelings as religious beings. There was no contradiction in these positions. Only by examining the written word could a confessor or spiritual director assess its orthodoxy; thus the importance of considering the nature of the relationship between nun-writer and confessor as one that lends itself to a variety of interpretations, and about which there will be many more comments in the future. The personal intimacy created by a nun’s introspective analysis and the process of sharing it with a member of the opposite sex are the departing points for analyzing the writings. For nuns, writing diaries of their inner spiritual universe was a process so personal that only a few examples remain because many of these testimonies of the soul were lost or destroyed by their own authors. Those that have survived tell us about faith, doubt, observance, daily life, and reflect the nature of piety practiced throughout the colonial period, because it changed little in terms of the spirituality they expressed.

Other forms of writing receive attention in this chapter, such as plays, poems, and history. The latter is of particular interest to historians insofar as it is the counterpoint of the spiritual diaries, and a much-used tool for the construction of emblematic and inspirational conventual figures. Biographies and chronicles of the orders were authored mostly by men, who had the traditional authority of writing. However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, nuns were appropriating it openly and publishing under their own names. In fact, they had been training themselves in creating an institutional and personal memory since the seventeenth century, but men blocked the freedom of their voice until the mid-eighteenth century. This was not the situation in Spain, and thus, here we can also see an imprint of gender control as a colonial practice whereby women were denied authorial persona. These narratives are only now emerging from archival obscurity. Fame was showered on one nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, but it is time to include the choir of muted voices that sang other tunes, perhaps less perfect in their expression but just as worthwhile in their message. Ending with the nuns’ own writings, this book seeks to complete a full circle insofar as they will help elucidate questions about vocation, decision making, and perception of a destiny within the cloisters posed in Chapter 1. When nuns wrote, they recovered their voice and articulated their highest as well as their most mundane thoughts, telling us what really mattered to them and inviting us to share with them their material and spiritual concerns.

While there is still much more to be learned about the brides of Christ in colonial Mexico, I hope that throughout the following pages the doors to their

convents will finally open to us and encourage a visit in their own terms. I have sought to become better acquainted with the brides of Christ as women facing the complexities posed by the desire to overcome their humanity and still defined by it. If I stimulate the reader to see in these women more than esoteric, distant expressions of womanhood, then I will feel rewarded for all the effort demanded by the task of instilling life into their memories.

CHAPTER ONE

The Path to the Convent

“Hermanita, cuando has de dejar de decir que quieres ser capuchina?” Aquí yo le respondía: “Cuando lo haya conseguido lo dejaré de decir.” “Little sister, when will you stop saying you wish to be a Capuchin?” And I answered: “When I become one I will stop saying it.”



Renouncing family and the comforts of home to live forever within the restricted walls of a convent was a choice of life that today seems too remote and too demanding for our highly secularized lifestyle. And yet, hundreds of women in Mexico, as elsewhere in Spain and Spanish America, chose profession and perpetual enclosure over marriage or life as a secular single woman. Only a few of them left testimonies to explain their decisions or disclose their feelings about taking the veil. We have to explore many sources to re-create not just the world in which they lived but also the social circumstances, religious convictions, and faith that encouraged them to enter a convent and remain in it. The recorded official request to enter a convent as a novitiate stated that the petitioner had always had an inclination for living a religious life, but this formulaic pattern does not necessarily cast light on the personal motives behind the decision.¹ However, the validity of the vocation should not be dismissed simply because it was expressed following a legal formula. It is true that while some nuns confessed they had suffered while adapting to what originally appeared as a compelling choice to them, others considered themselves happy and privileged by professing. In trying to understand the world of female cloisters between the late sixteenth and the late eighteenth centuries we have to accept that the resolution to enter into a convent remains a complex historical problem, the result of multilayered economic, familial, religious, and personal circumstances. What a novice was bound to accept when she took her final vows of profession was a way of life, a world with a culture of its own, quite different from that awaiting those who chose marrying and mothering children. The lives of those who entered the convent were not typical and the cloisters were special places to which only a chosen few could aspire. However, this exceptionality does not make conventual life less important than the life of laywomen. The cloisters were unique female worlds with an idiosyncratic blend of beliefs and religious observance, social consciousness and social practices, that were highly valued and respected in their own time.

QUALIFYING TO BECOME A NUN

Wanting to be a nun was not enough to gain access to a convent. Whether a young woman was fulfilling a vocation or simply being carried into the cloister by family ties or social pressure, the first consideration that she and her family had to bear in mind was whether or not she could fulfill the prerequisites demanded for profession. Factors of race and status in New World society had as much weight as the personal vocation of a potential novice. If the former did not meet specific standards, the doors of the convent remained closed to her regardless of the intensity of her desire or her faith. Because professing in a convent was thought to be as much a social issue as a personal one, race became a critical signifier in becoming a member of a religious community. Those aspiring to take the veil had to satisfy at least four requirements. Spanish descent expressed as “cleanliness of blood” (*limpieza de sangre*) was the first prerequisite. Race was a concern as early as the mid-sixteenth century, when it first became apparent that the unbridled sexuality of Spanish males was helping to create a racially diverse world by mating or marrying indigenous women. In those days, any woman of Spanish descent had high expectations of marrying well to a man of equal or better status than her own. But, adverse circumstances could thwart such aspirations. Too many poor men and women who arrived in the New World with hopes of climbing the social ladder and reaching an elite position in a rapidly evolving society were disappointed by their lack of success. Women whose parents or relatives never realized that dream were often regarded as endangered, and their virtue at stake, as they could potentially marry below their perceived station in life. They became candidates for protection in a religious community. In a letter to the Council of the Indies dated March 10, 1566, the Bishop of Tlaxcala, Fernando de Villagómez, pleaded for financial support for a house of “religious maidens” (*doncellas religiosas*), known as the *beaterio* of Santa Catalina de Sena. He argued that “maiden daughters of conquistadors, and honest Spanish people” were numerous and unable to marry their equals, because dowries were immoderately high. Being women, and thus fragile, it would be a good thing for the land to have a convent, “where the daughters of the good, could serve God, retaining their honor (*honra*).”² The success of the Spanish settlement was linked to the preservation of the sexual purity of those descendants of Spaniards who wished to retain their honor by refusing to marry down. This was a compelling argument, almost a declaration of social policy.

It was also a forceful act of self-definition for the colonial elite, hardly thirty years after the conquest of Tenochtitlán. The top families of the emerging society were, according to the bishop, able to afford large dowries for their daughters. However, for those who were poor, the convent was a solution to their social predicament.³ For this sixteenth-century bishop, money was obviously important, but status mattered more. Shelter and virginity at the service of God were the venues to maintaining social standing if money was missing. The dual path of the “two states” for women, marriage or religious vows, was already in place and, apparently, as firmly rooted as it was in Spain.⁴ Whether or not the situation of women was *exactly* as depicted in the sixteenth-century document, and whether the choice between marriage and convent may have been exaggerated by the Bishop, the fact still stands that the official “construct” of women as weak and threatened, and the beaterios and convents as sites of shelter, was part of the mind-set of those who were shaping New Spain’s society. That the idea had enough purchase among first settlers is proven by the arguments used by the founders of the convent of Jesús María in Mexico in 1581. Its proponents and supporters, all men of mature age and some social rank, stated that they wished to found an institution that would receive descendants of conquistadors, young maidens willing to serve God but lacking money to pay for the dowry they required for their

spiritual marriage. It was offensive to God that their nobility would be defiled by unequal marriages, especially if the beauty of some was likely to lead them into undesirable social situations.⁵ Thus, the honor of those women was emblematic of the honor of the new society. Men, and other women, understood that it was their moral duty to account for those in whose honor rested theirs, and began to dispense money for religious foundations.⁶

The concern about women's fate that so preoccupied sixteenth-century society began to be shaped when they were between twelve and fourteen years old. That was the threshold of maturity, when families began to think about placing their girls "*en estado*," in the state of either marriage to a human husband or marriage to a divine one, Christ. While there were white women who did not marry and/or lived in concubinage, especially by the mid-seventeenth century, this did not change the social and personal expectations of self-respecting families.⁷ In the case of desirable girls, such as those whose parents would endow them with appealing goods and cash, suitors appeared as soon as they entered into adolescence and marriages would be celebrated between the ages of fifteen and twenty. Girls born in a large family or who had lost either mother or father at an early age were highly susceptible to being catapulted into marriage or sent to a convent to be raised until they were marriageable.⁸

In a society fast becoming aware of its racial diversity, patrons willing to found either nunneries or beaterios soon defined these institutions as an enclave for their women folk to the almost complete exclusion of Indians or mixed-bloods. Exceptions to the rule of racial exclusion were few. Racial consciousness was in place by 1540, when Nuestra Sra. de La Concepción, the first convent of Mexico City, was founded.⁹ The first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, and some of his companions of the Franciscan Order had hoped that eventually Indian women would become such good Christians that some day they could be the brides of Christ. However, his first attempts at enclosing young indigenous women for indoctrination by devout women coming from Spain were a complete failure. Indian parents were reluctant to let their daughters enter such institutions. Once nunneries began to be founded in New Spain, they became bastions of racial selection which, reinforced by legitimacy of birth, made the cloisters almost impermeable to any other ethnic intrusion but that of the founders. Even though the granddaughters of Moctezuma, good Christian ladies, were admitted in La Concepción, their presence did not create a precedent for others of their racial provenance.¹⁰ Neither did the foundation of Santa Clara, in Querétaro in 1607, by a wealthy Indian, Diego de Tapia, who demanded that his only daughter be appointed as abbess, change the situation in the seventeenth century. His wish was granted by the city worthies eager to have a nunnery in their town, but after her death no other Indian was ever allowed to profess.¹¹ Archbishop Moya de Contreras explicitly rejected the possibility of admitting *mestizas* (mixed-bloods of Indian and Spaniards) in the convent of Jesús María.¹² Founders and patrons who protected women's convents and helped them survive for nearly three hundred years followed to the letter the founding fathers' stated wishes. The mid-sixteenth-century exclusionary rule was not broken until a convent for full-blooded Indian nuns opened its doors in 1724.¹³

Behind the foundation of nunneries was also the desire to replicate the Iberian world in New Spain. One of a number of key institutions that Spain transplanted to the New World, the nunnery was part of a world of belief, social ranking, and gender roles developing in Spain in the sixteenth century.¹⁴ Cloistering women was part of the paradigm of observance built by the reform of the religious orders that began late in the fifteenth-century Spain, and was strengthened by the challenge of Protestantism after 1530.¹⁵ In the New World, the cloister had an added symbolic meaning: the triumph of Christianity over the pagan beliefs of the indigenous peoples. Every nunnery erected in the viceroyalty of New Spain was a symbol of power and triumph. Planting spiritual and social values in the New World was the most important task after the military conquest, and one that involved women, whether married or cloistered, because women were in charge of helping to shape the early beliefs and behavior of children. The experience of a land populated by unfamiliar people who had practiced religions so alien and even antithetical to Christianity seemed to some men to offer incalculable dangers to the female sex. Christianity was a fragile flower blooming under unfavorable circumstances in the New World, and the Christian women who would help root and strengthen it deserved the utmost protection. This spiritual message, while not necessarily spelled out in the arguments of the proponents of women's cloisters, was an implicit and forceful assumption for all of them. Chroniclers who later on looked back at the foundation of convents tried to infuse their histories with an aura of religious significance. The seventeenth-century savant, Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, preceded the story of the foundation of the convent of Jesús María, with information about the existence of temple virgins among the gentile Mexicans, and tied it to the triumph of Christianity as the true religion. A similar discourse of Christian flowering among the Tarascans was made by Jesuit Juan Uvalde de Anguita, on the celebration of the foundation of the Indian convent of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de Cosamaloapán in March 1737.¹⁶

To restrict convents to the descendants of those who had earned a kingdom for the Crown seemed eminently just for sixteenth-century people insofar as they would protect those in need of help and who bore the emblem of social and spiritual order by respecting the laws of king and God. Race was the most stringent of criteria devised by conventual patrons, but by no means the only one. Legitimacy of birth followed very closely in second place. During the sixteenth century illegitimacy was commonly associated with the birth of *mestizos*, although by the seventeenth century, births out of wedlock were commonplace even among those of Spanish descent.¹⁷ Legitimacy of birth was the result of conception within the boundaries of a marriage sanctified by the church and a sign of compliance with social order. Thus, legitimacy was closely scrutinized and verified at profession by a copy of the baptismal record or the sworn testimony of reliable witnesses. In theory, only those conceived within the boundaries of a Christian marriage were good enough for the loftiest of husbands.

This social circumstance was, however, liable to some interpretation that made room for human weakness. *Hijas naturales*, the offspring of a union of single parents outside marriage, were sometimes allowed to profess, but only after their "defect of birth" was "excused" by the bishop or archbishop. There was some poetic justice in recognizing that even kings incurred this weakness of the flesh and begot children outside the mandates of the church. Of course, only *hijas naturales* of white parentage were ever allowed this exemption. Their origin was perceived as a youthful mistake among unwed parents. It was different for children conceived by a couple in which one of the partners was married to somebody else. That was adultery, and it carried heavy moral and social penalties for the offspring. However, many a high-born single man had carried affairs with a single woman of his social class whom, for many circumstances, he did not marry.¹⁸ As long as the father raised that child, or acknowledged her and assumed the responsibility to provide her with a dowry, the girl may have had a chance of being accepted into a convent. This was not a frequent practice, but an exception only possible under negotiated circumstances. Whiteness, financial support, and social leverage were necessary to achieve the acceptance of a natural child. If necessary, witnesses broke the silence of the birth registers that could state "of unknown parents" and disclose provenance. Thus, Juana de Sandoval, who wished to be admitted in the convent of San Lorenzo of Mexico in 1728, was acknowledged to be the natural daughter of Doña Antonia de Arenas y Tapia and Don Andrés Muñoz de Sandoval, who was a member of the family of the Duke of Linares, former Viceroy of New Spain.¹⁹ For her profession she was endowed by her uncle. Clearly, the result of a social misstep, the girl had been cared for by the family and her lineage was only "somewhat" stained by her birth. The nuns did not object to her joining their ranks. In October 1746, Isabel Agustina de Zurricalda, backed by Domingo García Sáenz, a merchant who offered her 4,000 pesos' dowry, asked to be relieved from her "defect of birth" to enter as a black-veiled nun in La Concepción,

the oldest convent in the kingdom. Having verified that although of “unknown parents” she was “*española*” (white), honest, and virtuous, she was granted permission to enter. She was thirty-four years old at the time, already too old to marry, but not too old to take the veil.²⁰ Despite exceptions, the weight of respectability was hard to dismiss. When a young woman born in Nepantla decided to enter the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico City, in 1669, her powerful patrons forged a legitimate birth document and declared her born within wedlock. Later known as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, she became the most notable poet of the colonial period, and the truth about her being *hija natural* remained unknown until the twentieth century.²¹

Youth and virginity were usually third in place as qualifications for professing. Becoming a nun was a learning experience that demanded the strength, determination, pliability, and wholehearted enthusiasm that young women were expected to have. The canonically approved minimum age was fifteen, by which time the aspirant was assumed to understand the meaning of her decision. Monastic rules also stipulated a maximum age to profess as a novice, often no more than the mid-thirties, but exceptions were allowed. Girls under fifteen could live in some convents as potential candidates, protégées of a particular nun, or as “pupils” sent there by their parents to learn reading, writing, sewing, embroidering, and perhaps some music. As soon as they reached adolescence a decision was expected: they would either return home with the prospects of marriage, or they would apply for profession. Many poor women, either relatives or protégées, stayed in the convents as companions of the nuns or as helpers and servants without ever professing. They were called “*niñas*” (despite the advanced age of many), a euphemism that protected their stay.²²

The age for admission to a convent marked the threshold of puberty and the waking of sexuality, but in aspiring to a cloistered life virginity marked those believed to be favored by God. Unlike race and economic status, virginity was a personal and private qualification that was assumed although not verified. Sexual intercourse and sexual pleasure were assumed to impede the exercise of the highest aspects of the human spirituality.²³ For that reason celibacy and virginity were celebrated by the Church Fathers and extolled from the fifth century onward.²⁴ By the sixteenth century virginity had become an important qualifier for aspirants to profess, and one increasingly celebrated as *the* most desirable marker of the brides of Christ, because it placed them close to the angels. For centuries the Catholic Church had extolled the virginity of Mary as the highest example of sexual purity, and this tradition was naturally carried to Mexico. The term *doncella* added to *española* and legitimate implied virginity and was the third element in that holy trinity of personal qualifications. A single woman without claims to virginity was called *soltera*. The vast majority of nuns professed before they were twenty, and they were presumed to be virgins by having lived secluded lives, either at home or in the convent. However, the church had a space for widows who, under exceptional circumstances, yearned to fulfill an intimate and persistent vocation that marriage had impeded.²⁵ Having known men carnally, the ritual of entrance was slightly changed for them and sometimes they experienced difficulties within the convent.²⁶ Sor Marina de la Cruz, one of the founders of the Carmelite Order in Mexico City, was twice widowed when she was accepted as a lay sister in the convent of Jesús María in July 1580. After she began to criticize the manner of observance of the Rule in the convent she suffered verbal abuse and was assigned the lowest menial occupations in the convent. Those offended by her criticism of conventual observance alleged that a lay sister, especially a widow who had spent many years in the “vanities of the world,” should not criticize “cloistered virgins who served God since their tender years.”²⁷ Ironically, having had a widow as a founder, the Carmelite Order in New Spain was not readily disposed to accept widows. In 1614, the Puebla Carmelites, after having accepted a young Spanish woman, María Núñez, as Sor María del Costado, learned, to their regret, that she was a widow. They made her novitiate an excruciating series of trials to test her humility and stamina. She succeeded in her intentions and professed in 1615.²⁸

The best-known nun-widow in New Spain was Antonia Josefa Rodríguez de Pedroso, who in 1769, being seventeen years old, was married off to a forty-three-year-old close relative, Manuel Rodríguez de Pinillos. Her wishes to be a Capuchin nun were quashed by family pressures to alleviate her widowed mother’s predicament as head of a family of ten children. Her mother invested heavily in her dowry, which amounted to over 40,000 pesos, an excellent asset for her husband, who in 1778 received the Marquisate of Selvanevada. Fifteen years after his marriage he died, leaving Antonia Josefa with seven children. In 1791 two of her daughters entered the convent, one willingly and the other as a result of an “impulse” to follow her sister. They were nineteen and sixteen years of age, respectively. Six years later, the Marchioness herself decided to take the veil. She took her twelve-year-old daughter with her, and professed in the convent of Regina Coeli as Sor María Antonia de los Dolores, twenty-eight years after her marriage, thus fulfilling a frustrated vocation.²⁹ Other accounts of widows entering religion present the death of the husband as a portentous expression of God’s will to open the possibility of grace to women in all “states.” Widowhood relieved the woman from worldly concerns and gave her the freedom to accept a new, divine husband.³⁰

The fourth qualification to profess was the provision of a dowry before the spiritual nuptials could take place. While in their inception some convents agreed to accept undowered girls, it was understood that a patron would provide the resources for their upkeep. Along with other donations, dowries were necessary to help build capital to sustain the convent. In the sixteenth century dowries ranged between 1,000 and 1,500 pesos but that amount kept on climbing throughout the seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century it was 4,000 pesos in most convents.³¹ While it was possible for a girl to marry without a dowry, taking the veil without one was only possible under special circumstances. Girls could make their way into the convent by learning how to play an instrument and serving as musicians for required “sung” conventual masses (*misas cantadas*) and religious services demanding music. This option, however, was open to a limited number of conventual places.³²

The dowry was a hurdle to be sorted out by those who may have had all other qualifications, including that of vocation.³³ Conventual dowries were above and beyond what a poor family could afford and thus, this requirement created a social chasm between those women who could profess and those who could not. To “remedy” the predicament of women lacking a dowry, lay and religious patrons provided capital that, invested in real estate or loans, would yield interest sufficient to pay for a given number of aspirants to take the veil. These funds were known as pious deeds, and the novices professing under their terms were called *monjas capellanas*. By endowing a convent with a substantial sum of money, the patron could acquire the right to enter a member of his or her family without dowry and project an unbeatable image of piety and social rank in his or her community. Not even the Crown was beyond the reaffirmation of commitment to favor women and church by providing support to convents and the profession of eligible but impecunious girls. The royal imprint was attached to two nunneries in New Spain: those of Jesús María in Mexico City and the convent of Santa Clara in Querétaro. This meant that the Crown made a financial commitment to the institutions and, in the case of Jesús María, paid for a number of royal capellanas. According to the historian of the convent, Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, a niece of Archbishop Moya de Contreras, Micaela de los Angeles, was of royal blood (daughter of Phillip II) and a private letter from the bishop to the king prompted the latter’s support for the convent.³⁴ In the seventeenth century the convent was entitled to eight royal capellanas, whose dowry would be paid from the royal coffers.³⁵

Some confraternities helped to raise money for either marriage or profession of poor but otherwise “appropriate” girls with all the required qualifications.³⁶ A worthy candidate to profession could also apply directly or indirectly to the charity of rich men or other members of their families for help in paying their dowries. The best-known Mexican nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was favored by this kind of patronage, since her family was not

able to pay for her dowry.³⁷ Nuns could also become patrons themselves. Fr. Alonso Franco, seventeenth-century Dominican chronicler, praised Diego Hurtado de Peñalosa and Catarina de León, parents of Sor Juana de Santa Catarina, who professed in 1607, for endowing their daughter so well that she could, in turn, endow another poor novice. Such acts of charity, he stated, could and would cause many spiritual gains to society.³⁸

PROFESSION AS A CONSTRUCTED DESTINY

Assuming that a young woman had all the required personal and economic attributes for profession, her vocation and/or desire to profess remains difficult to explain in mere social or economic terms. The intimate feelings of a woman hoping to serve God are among the most challenging to fathom. In search for a close view of the inner world in which a religious vocation thrived we must resort to sources that have obvious biases or represent a sensibility that demands extreme caution and some empathy in their handling. A few autobiographical and a larger number of biographical writings offer glimpses of the state of mind and degree of faith behind the decision to profess. In both, reality and imagination blend, imparting a certain air of uncertainty to the analysis of causes and motivations leading to the choice of a cloistered life.

Historians and literary historians agree that sacred biography and even autobiography intend to “represent” or create models of behavior that fit well-established canons of sacred writing.³⁹ Some forms of “saintly” behavior reflect the religious mentality of the period, but some of the virtues written about and praised as models of sanctity were hundreds of years old. The representation of the desire to profess as an irresistible force, almost a predestination, that we find in Novohispanic hagiographies is very similar to European sources.⁴⁰ The construction of a destiny for religious life began as the first hagiographical and historical records were written in the seventeenth century. They were amplified in sermons for the profession or the funeral of nuns, biographical sketches in the chronicles of some religious orders, and full-blown biographies of a select number of nuns.

All of these works show the influence of inspirational books and lives of saints available in Spain in the sixteenth century.⁴¹ The desire to create models of religious observance and to assimilate the lives of women in New Spain to mainstream Counter-Reformation Catholicism, is patent and inescapable.⁴² Thomas J. Heffernan, in his thoughtful study of European sacred biographies, posits that their value lies in the interaction of the author and the reader for the obvious goal of reinforcing the faith through individual example. These texts reflect received tradition and are designed to celebrate virtue. The fact that they show many similarities in claimed life events and writing techniques does not reflect negatively on their ability to convey models of piety and faith to those who read them.⁴³ The uniformity of certain experiences in these lives speaks of a will to be “canonically correct” and provide a good example for those who sought a means of fulfilling their faith in religion. Surprisingly, however, reliable facts can be gleaned from stereotypical interpretations of predestination and miraculous signs from heaven. Data about social provenance, education, family environment and reaction to the expected profession, social support of patrons, incidents of life in the convent, diseases, diet, devotional practices, ceremonial rituals, and so forth, are tucked in biographies and autobiographies. While clichés are found in these writings, they also reflect their period and help us to build the cultural wrapping that enveloped the novices. It is in the spirit of this type of analysis that Mexican hagiographic materials help to shape a picture of the complexities involved in the determination of religious vocation and religious life of the hundreds who professed as an act of faith, as well as the problems posed by a misunderstanding of such a vocation.

Each aspirant was a unique case as she approached a convent seeking acceptance to enter the novitiate. Religious testimonials offer a variety of peculiar features that “signaled” the profession of each nun as a destiny fulfilled. Whether at home or in a convent, a young woman who met the social requirements to profess was presumed to answer a call when she requested entrance as a novice. This was the full expectation of ecclesiastical authorities and society in general. The convent was a “naturalized” female port of destination for the social class that had helped to create a vision of piety suitable to satisfy the lack of choices available to its women. Testing religious vocation was no easy matter and followed no specific rules. Parents, confessors, and nuns within the walls of the convent had to rely on intuitive means to establish whether an applicant was truly sincere. There were no guarantees they would make the right judgment, but they were bound to examine each case with care and take the chances in the same manner that the professant was taking hers in believing that she was meant for the convent. Even though there was one year of trial before the final profession, the entrance in the novitiate involved a moral and economic pledge from the family, the aspirant, and the convent itself. They all had a stake in seeing it reach a successful completion.

In reviewing the formation of vocation, the home was the first locus for experiencing the piety that would encourage the feeling of being destined to live “in religion.” The process involved introspection and praxis. It was at home where many a young woman would begin this path by joining the frequent practices of familial piety. Very religious and practicing parents would exert a strong influence as role models for their children. The father of Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, a notable Puebla nun, was himself a devout man who sixteen years before his death began a life of ascetic practice at home.⁴⁴ Daily prayers, regular attendance to mass, the cultivation of devotion to favorite saints, and the reading of pious books in the family circle reinforced young women’s piety.⁴⁵ Regular attendance to church and processions were among the few social events outside their homes afforded to most women. The many celebrations of the religious calendar supplied enough opportunities to reinforce family, personal, and community piety while enhancing the aura of respect surrounding the church. After age seven children began their religious indoctrination, learning their catechism until they were ready to take the Eucharist and perform the sacrament of confession, which was compulsory at least once a year but which most women took more often.⁴⁶ This intense practice of religious observance led many girls to believe that they had a vocation for the cloistered life. By age seven or eight, some of them would begin formulating their vocation and following “religious” practices at home that they thought imitated those carried in convents.

As a child, Juana Palacios Berruecos, later María de San José, grew up in a family in which prayer and readings from the lives of saints were daily affairs. She began ascetic practices in imitation of the readings and later wrote that since those days she had always felt she had a religious vocation.⁴⁷ In her personal life account, Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio, an early-seventeenth-century nun in the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico, wrote that as soon as God gave her the ability of reading she spent all her time reading the life of Our Lady of the Rosary and the lives of saints in *Flos Sanctorum*. From those books she conceived a great desire to escape from her parents’ house and retire to the desert to suffer like the hermit saints. Since she could not do that, she began to practice some corporal discipline and self-flagellation at home. She had no inclination for children’s games and her mother had to oblige her to play with other children.⁴⁸ The “predestination” theme revealing itself in childhood is one of the key characteristics of hagiography that even those writing autobiographies assimilated into their narrative. This does not mean that they were “inventing” the experience, but that in their recollections they placed greater emphasis on what, in retrospect, they found meaningful to shape their decision. At fifteen, wrote Sor María Magdalena, she experienced a great desire to serve God and, lacking an advisor, she entrusted herself to the Virgin Mary. She tells us that she had a revelation in a dream, yet another common rhetorical figure, that made her understand that the way to serve God was to be in spiritual solitude. She then realized that she had to go into the cloister. The rejection of the world for a life of *recogimiento* (gathering or recollecting within oneself) was the pillar of sixteenth-century spirituality which, adopted by Counter-Reformation authors, continued to be the venue for finding God.⁴⁹ With the help of a Jesuit confessor,

María Magdalena entered the convent of San Jerónimo in July 1590. A similar story of early fixation with the idea of becoming a Carmelite nun is that of Mariana de Jesús Nazareno, whose pious parents allowed her to dress in a habit at age four. Her biographer enhanced her life story with elements of dangers overcome since she was in her mother's womb and childhood encounters with animals. She entered the Puebla Carmelites in 1617, when she was thirteen, and left visionary writings attesting to her full acceptance of her religious state at that early age.⁵⁰

A professed nun in the family could become a beacon signaling others to join in the cloistered life. One frequently finds sisters joining sisters in the same convent or professing in another convent. Sor María de San José, cited above, wished for nothing more than to follow her sister in the religious life. Family ties bonded women beyond ancestral homes and kept them together in conventual cells. Three Ontiveros family members professed in Santa Clara in Mexico City in 1645 and 1649, respectively. In 1677 and 1688 a second generation of the family joined the convent when Sor María de la Presentación and Isabel de San Pedro Ontiveros professed. The same convent sheltered sisters Ana Francisca de San Jerónimo and Manuela de San José Carranza, who joined the convent in 1727, and two sisters of the Torres family who professed in 1740.⁵¹ Sor Catalina de Cristo and Francisca de San José Tobar Sotelo joined the Carmelites of San José in Mexico in 1620, and in 1621 two sisters of the Galindo Sigura family joined them.⁵² Of the eleven children of Diego Felipe de Mora and María de Cuellar, seven followed a religious career; two of their daughters professed as nuns.⁵³ Other studies, such as those of Manuel Ramos on the Carmelite Order, Rosalva Loreto on the nunneries of Puebla, and Margaret Chowning on the convent of La Purísima Concepción in San Miguel el Grande, confirm the disposition toward profession among sisters or nieces in some families.⁵⁴ In Puebla, these women belonged to families of wealth whose members were generous patrons of the church and whose male members also took the holy orders. Loreto cites the example of the Yáñez Remuzgo de Vera family, which had eleven members (sisters, half sisters, and nieces) professing in two of the city's convents.⁵⁵ Such family groups helped root the institution to the community even though there is no evidence that any single family sent members to any convent from more than one or at the most two generations. Some of the great benefactors of nuns throughout the seventeenth century, the period of greatest fervor in Mexico, did not have children themselves.⁵⁶ What patrons requested for themselves and their families was the right of appointing capellanas, or endowed nuns. The recipients could be relatives in several degrees of closeness or simply beneficiaries of their choice. Some remarkable cases of family ties in seventeenth-century Mexico City show that sisters or daughters of patrons were assumed to have vocation and entered ipso facto as founders. For example, Juan Márquez de Orozco, who died in 1621, left his hefty wealth to found the convent of San Bernardo. His three sisters were among the founders when the convent began its life in 1636.⁵⁷ The dean of the university, Fernando de Villegas, and his wife Isabel de Sandoval, proposed the foundation of a convent dedicated to Saint Joseph, offering their eight daughters as founders. Two of them were already nuns in two other convents. Founded in 1610, this institution eventually received five sisters and the maternal grandmother as nuns, while two of the sisters got married.⁵⁸ The seclusion of family members was an accepted mechanism to protect elite females and it does not preclude the existence of faith in those who agreed to live as nuns.

However, the search for personal motivation continues to entice. The correspondence between a Puebla matron and the abbess of the Capuchin convent of San Felipe de Jesús, in Mexico City, records the intensity of desire to enter a convent among some young women.⁵⁹ In a letter dated January 21, 1689, Sor Lorenza, the abbess, tells her patron that the convent had an aspirant, "a young woman who is not yet fifteen" who had "all the attributes required of beauty, good birth, a good voice and reader, and raised with much virtue." Such was her desire to be in the convent that she rose early from bed to hear Prima (the first prayers held at the convent at 4:00 a.m.) from the street. The nuns were reluctant to let her in and, in order to test her vocation, asked her to wait until Lent for an answer to her request to be admitted. Obviously disappointed, the girl, whose name is not mentioned, made other plans. Between January 16 and January 21 [the abbess does not provide the exact date] she took the opportunity of finding the main door open to run into the convent. She ran "so fast she looked like paper." Once inside she removed her secular clothes and begged to be given the habit "for the blood of Christ." The nuns were physically unable to throw her out and the archbishop gave his permission for her to stay in the convent.⁶⁰ The Capuchins sheltered another precocious nun. She was María Luisa Saénz Moreno, born on August 3, 1673. In October 1678, Archbishop Payo de Ribera allowed her to live in the convent wearing a small habit. She professed at age eighteen in 1691 as Sor María Francisca. Her sister was also a nun in the convent under the name of Sor Dorotea Francisca.⁶¹ Girls such as María Luisa who were brought up in a convent would see professing as a natural choice, a commitment to a life they had seen for years as normal. They never experienced any other option and were happy to remain in the place where they had grown up and with a community of women they considered their "family." This was also the case of Sor María de Santo Domingo, raised in La Concepción of Mexico, which she left to take the Dominican habit in Santa Catarina de Sena.⁶²

While the biographers try to explain a certain pattern of religious predestination, there were obvious complex, interwoven personal circumstances leading the young women into a religious life. The biographer of Mother Antonia de San Jacinto, a nun in Santa Clara, Querétaro, tells how she belonged to a family with connections to the Counts of Santiago and some Galician hidalgos. Having lost their properties and fortunes, and with eight children to raise, the family retreated to a rural property to live in genteel poverty. The future nun became sick at age two and a misguided "surgeon" who operated on her left her with a lame arm. In charge of domestic tasks in the house, she suffered taunts and abuse because of her disability. It was "natural" for this docile and scorned child of a large family to begin to practice body disciplines, refuse an offer of marriage, and seek profession as her destiny. With the help of her confessor she found several patrons who provided for her dowry and professed on October 28, 1664, even though the nuns almost had a change of mind on account of her health. Later, two of her sisters also entered the convent. As a nun Sor Antonia remained poor and continued to receive alms from confessors, but she was well known for her piety and religious flights, eventually becoming the object of veneration and respect in her community.⁶³

Another example of how sickness associated with family piety nurtured a vocation is that of Sor María Inés de los Dolores, born María Inés Mora de Cuellar in Puebla. Raised in a family in which four brothers became Jesuits, one a Carmelite, one a secular priest, and her sister a nun, the spiritual atmosphere of devotion in this house must have been quite intense. At seven she contracted typhus and the ministrations of a physician bleeder left her blind. This inclined her to solitude and obedience. At nine she asked for and received an eternal vow of chastity from the confessor. Throughout her life she remained under the care of several notable confessors who led her in her spiritual exercises and pious readings. Suffering from epilepsy, she was not a candidate any convent would admit as a professant. Thus, before dying, her mother arranged for her to enter the convent of San Jerónimo to stay under the protection of one of her professed sisters. Her family naturally saw the cloister as a safe place for a woman who suffered severely from many ailments.⁶⁴ Despite her infirmities María Inés lived to a ripe age in the convent. As a recompense for her steadfastness, the community agreed to give her the veil just before her death at age sixty-two. While the lack of alternatives of this blind woman seemed to direct her to the convent, the influence of confessors and the family's own unusual vocation for religion were conditions that shaped her life, as they shaped those of many others.

Confessors or spiritual directors were influential in the formation of a religious vocation. Sor María Josefa Lino de la Canal, founder of the convent

of La Concepción in the town of San Miguel el Grande, was under the guidance of the same confessor between the ages of six and thirty-one. She professed in 1752 when she was twenty-one.⁶⁵ She was among the hundreds of known cases of girls who could be kindled and nourished by a persuasive male authority, whose task was to determine the depth of her faith and to encourage those he felt were true vocations. Of course, his judgment was possibly colored by his desire to shepherd another soul into a privileged place. These men established themselves as the arbiters of a woman's destiny early in life, and watched attentively as their spiritual daughters grew up, in order to shape their characters and help them take a decision favoring profession. Of Sor María Inés de los Dolores, mentioned above, her Augustinian confessor said that "she was like soft wax and all he impressed [in her], with great facility, remained stamped in her heart with such firmness as it were in marble."⁶⁶ This ability to impress himself upon a spiritual daughter was played successfully by Juan L. Aguado, a priest who convinced the future Luisa de Santa Catarina, an orphan who entertained no thought of professing until she came under his influence, that she had a destiny as a nun.⁶⁷

Parents were conscious of the influence confessors had over their daughters, although many did not expect it to take a turn toward profession. This was possibly the case with Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, who was directed, among others, by Franciscan confessor and missionary, Fr. Antonio Margil, a charismatic evangelizer of Indians and stern reformer of social customs in Novohispanic cities. He left a deep impression among many women, and Sebastiana Josefa was one of them. Whether or not she was persuaded to profess by his word or those of others, her parents were reluctant to allow her to take the veil. However, one of her confessors decided the situation when he forthrightly told her parents that their daughter had a vocation and should profess, forcing them to accept a decision presented to them as a combination of faith, fate, and personal will.⁶⁸ Parents could and would willingly put their daughters early in life under the guidance of a spiritual director as a means of ensuring their purity, and the best religious education for them. For such types, a daughter's decision to enter the convent brought pride and happiness.⁶⁹ Sor Isabel de Santiago, who professed in Santa Clara, Mexico, in 1607, grew up in the belief that religious life was her vocation. Her parents were joyous when she took the veil.⁷⁰

In fact, some parents are said to have offered their daughters to God as soon as they were born. Whether as an act of devotion or a desire to find them a decent and safe state in life, neither of these factors was incompatible or contradictory to people in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.⁷¹ Among the most compelling cases of parental design over a daughter is that of Sor Leonor de los Angeles, one of the few examples of a woman of part-African ancestry to be admitted in a convent under the mantle of spirituality. She was from Antequera, Oaxaca, and as her story goes, having been saved from drowning as a child, her father (whom we assume must have been white) dedicated her to God, and took her to the convent of Santa Clara, Mexico, possibly at about the time that this convent was in the process of being founded. She took the habit of a *donada*, or "given" person because she was a mulatta. Donadas were occupied in menial services in the convent and could never leave it. Perhaps her father thought that the convent would offer an acceptable alternative to marriage given her mixed blood. Perhaps he was truly religious and believed she had been saved by a miracle, and that it was a "sign" of God's intentions.⁷² Sor Leonor was very devoted and developed curative and prophetic abilities. At her death the convent's vicar wished to cut off one of her fingers as a relic, but he was unable to carry out his design because, as the story goes, it bled profusely as if she were alive. Her funeral was well attended by the town's worthies. Twenty years after her death, the nuns wished to transport her bones to their new convent, and they found the site of her bones by following its sweet smell. This was "proof" of the high qualities of her virtues. Miracles of this kind were frequent in hagiographies but seldom occur in a mulatta servant woman. The convent and religious life had transformative capacities that could raise a "lower" person from her status and inspire others to seek similar spiritual elevation, and hagiography thrived on such examples.

Biographers developed a special set of signifiers they ascribed to the future nuns to explain their "mark" as women chosen by God. The teleological linearity of the biographies and hagiographies presented these gifted and precocious girls as shunning childhood games and puerile conversations, disdaining the company of other girls, and acting like small adults already infused with the presence and love of God.⁷³ As children, these future nuns had exceptional virtues such as a deep devotional affection for the Virgin Mary, or a penchant for sacrifice not appropriate of "regular" childhood. They would make vows of chastity at an early age and spend hours praying or even practicing some form of physical discipline. They rejected the fine clothes their families provided for them, or lived in rooms separate from the rest of the family as small nuns in their cells. They had a modest demeanor, prayed for the faults of others, behaved especially well toward the servants, and engaged in menial labor to exercise themselves in humility.⁷⁴ Some traits were unusual. Dominican Sor María de los Angeles, who died in 1638 in Santa Catalina de Sena, Mexico, was "very compassionate" not only with her sisters but with animals, "which she adopted and fed."⁷⁵ The Franciscan inclination for universal compassion made this childhood trait unusual for a professed nun. Querétaro Capuchin Sor María Marcela tells us about her good will for the poor living in her father's land and how she nursed a sick child for months.⁷⁶

Sor Juana de Santa Catarina, praised by Fr. Alonso Franco as one of the "stars" of the Dominican convent of Santa Catalina de Sena in Mexico City, was the daughter of a well-to-do family whose house was bought for the foundation of the convent. At seven she already knew how to read and write and knew the Breviary to perfection, helping even some nuns to understand it. She took self-discipline and followed the fast for the vigil of the saints' days.⁷⁷ When her ancestral home was sold to become the convent she refused to leave it and stayed with the nuns, taking the veil when she reached the appropriate age. Thus, the special signs that marked these children as examples of precocious renunciation and prefiguration of future nuns lead the reader to see their childhood as a premonition of the metamorphosis that would take place in the cloister. Religious biographers do not present a complete record of childhood, not even the childhood of those who became nuns, but these narratives suggest that fun and games were not part of the ideal upbringing of little girls in the homes of religious parents. The narrow and disciplined confines of home and church were conducive to creating and accepting a life commitment that had an aura of uniqueness to it and provided the ultimate comfort of the promise of salvation of their souls.

PROFESSING AGAINST ALL ODDS

With childhood portrayed as a test in self-control and piety, the destiny to become a nun could follow an easy path with the support of parents and patrons. On the other hand, it could find resistance and cause suffering that made the final prize seem even more precious. It is not surprising that biographers also disclosed the fact that not all parents were delighted with the idea of having their daughters profess. A young woman in Mexico was legally under paterfamilias, the absolute control exercised by the father over children.⁷⁸ Lacking a father, she would be under an appointed legal guardian or under the charge of her widowed mother if she was named as such by the father. Therefore, profession was more than a personal decision. It was also a family decision, insofar as parents or legal guardians had to consent to it and provide the professant with the financial backing demanded by the convent. However devout, parents were expected to have wedding plans for their daughters, and in such cases they objected strongly to the idea of profession. Family objection could develop into a test of wills. Biographers paid much attention to the narrative of opposition to emphasize the victory of the wills of nun and God.

While it is possible that parental opposition could be enhanced in the memory of nuns or their biographers seeking to tell an exemplary story, the

reasons for opposition are not difficult to see. Young women were assets in marriage arrangements that would be spoiled by profession. María de Rojas, daughter of a poor family from Atlixco, was a beautiful girl whose parents hoped that her physical attributes could find her an appropriate suitor and enable them to escape their poverty. At fourteen they had already arranged a marriage for her, when she claimed to have seen a vision of Mary who asked her not to marry anybody but her own son. Here the piety of the family contributed to changing the course of the marriage. Her mother took her to a confessor who, convinced of her “destiny,” requested her entrance in the Carmelites of Puebla. Not having a dowry, she was admitted as a white veiled nun for service in the kitchen in 1634 as Sor María de San Alberto.⁷⁹ While her parents did not gain status through the planned marriage, they gained it through their daughter’s profession. For her part, María de Rojas may not have wanted to marry at all, especially at fourteen, and the convent offered a lifelong refuge preferable to an unwanted suitor. She lived nearly forty-nine years as a professed nun.⁸⁰

Family affection could also play a role in parental or family opposition. Losing a daughter to the convent was equivalent to death, insofar as she would never return to her home and would be encouraged not to see her relatives with any frequency. This was an unbearable situation for some parents, regardless of how religious they were. After many years in the convent Querétaro Capuchin, Sor María Marcela remembered vividly her family’s response to her decision to profess. She was so apprehensive about her authoritarian father’s reaction to her wish that she used a friar as an intermediary to break the news to him while they were visiting Querétaro. Her father was so stunned by her intentions that he could not bring himself to speak to or look at her for three days, during which he could hardly eat or sleep. When he resolved to talk about it with her, he tried to divert her intentions by telling her that while her choice was “saintly” it would be best to return to their home in Maravatio and think about it for a while. He simply wished to remove her from the vicinity of her convent of choice and isolate her in their rural estate, possibly hoping to quell her interest. They had several fights over the matter and she refused to return home with the family. She finally defied him by making him answerable for the salvation of her soul. This call to his conscience softened her father’s iron will, and although reluctant, he agreed to visit the Capuchin nuns to confer with them about his daughter’s intentions. She stayed in Querétaro with a family approved by her father. Back at home, her sisters and brothers did not take the news calmly. They were hurt by the fact that she had not shared her plans with them and began to mourn as if she were about to die.⁸¹

Her father did not give up easily. María Marcela knew she would be missed because, as a widower, he relied on her to manage the home and her four younger siblings. He used the mediation of a friar friend of his to dissuade her, and allowed a former suitor to visit her to propose marriage again and follow her for several days. Her older brother, who was studying to take the religious orders, could not believe her vocation was true, and also visited her, asking her to quit. Nothing moved her. On the day of her profession as a novice the family’s anguished expressions of suffering saddened her.

They were spent with crying and showed me their sentiments by refusing to talk to me. My brother Don José, the most passionate among them, did not want to see me and avoided being where I was. The day I took the habit he hid to avoid seeing me entering [the convent]. He was already ordained. My profession godmother was my sister Doña Petra, and she was my cross until the end. As we rode in the same coach, she cried incessantly. The two younger brothers, left unattended, joined the coach walking by its side, and cried all the way while we took the last ride on the accustomed streets.⁸²

This is not the only example of familial grief on the loss of a sister or daughter to a convent. The ominous farewell to a separation that would last forever was not assuaged by the hope of seeing her once in a while, perhaps with diminishing frequency, during conventual visitations. The Capuchin Order, well known for its rigorous discipline which reduced life comforts to a minimum, was particularly feared by families who had brought up their daughters surrounded by all the amenities they could afford.

Leocadia González Aranzamendi, founder of the Capuchins of Santa Ana in Puebla in 1704, and known in religion as Sor María Leocadia, is another case in point. She belonged to the wealthy Aranzamendi-Salazar family, and was not the only nun in the family, since her sister had professed in Santa Catarina de Sena in Mexico. Leocadia’s mother died when she was twelve and the sisters were interned in Santa Catalina de Sena for their education. For several years, we are told, she lived a “saintly life” and the nuns were eager to accept her as a candidate for profession. However, having reached a marriageable age without having expressed a definite choice for profession, her father sent an uncle to offer her the alternative: marriage to a “well-to-do gentleman” known to her family.⁸³ Leocadia declined the offer and stated she would be a nun in a future convent. That would be the Capuchins of San Felipe de Jesús, which was founded in 1665 with nuns traveling from Toledo. When they arrived in Mexico, Leocadia joined them. Her father opposed her decision but, as the story goes, he received a “divine” hint when a donkey almost killed him. He agreed to her profession, although he unsuccessfully continued his attempts to make her change her mind throughout her novitiate. One of the reasons for this insistence was the fact that Leocadia had a very intense penitent novitiate period. She followed a regimen of severe self-disciplines and was subjected to hard tests by her superiors. Her body was covered with ulcers, and her father alleged she could not persevere in her intention. However, she took her final profession in July 1667.

Another recorded violent reaction against profession was that of the father of María de Jesús Tomellín, later known as the Lily of Puebla, and whose candidacy to beatification was pursued by her fellow Mexicans for over a century. María de Jesús’ mother had grown up in a cloister, which she left to obey her mother’s decision to marry the man chosen for her.⁸⁴ Frustrated in her vocation, she offered her firstborn to God and brought her up in a deeply religious atmosphere. It was claimed that by the age of three she already knew how to engage in mental prayer. Readings of saints’ lives at home inspired her and at six she wished to emulate the hermit life of Saint John the Baptist. Visions and raptures were said to have come naturally to her. Her father’s plans differed from her mother’s, and as soon as she was of age, he found a good suitor and forbade her to leave home unaccompanied, fearing she would run away to a convent. Despite the close supervision, María de Jesús managed to escape into a convent under her own brother’s nose. Her biographer claims that her father fainted when he learned the news and was unconscious for twenty-four hours. On recovering, he re-drafted his will, disinheriting his daughter, while threatening to kill his wife for having encouraged the girl to become a nun.⁸⁵ Even as she carried out her novitiate, he continued to induce her to abandon it and promised to increase her share in the family’s inheritance (*mejora*) if she would agree to leave and marry. María de Jesús professed on March 17, 1599. Escaping from such a dominant father to a more congenial life in the convent could not have been much of a sacrifice for a willing and religious young woman, and the biographer took the best advantage of the opposition between a pious mother and an intransigent, pragmatic father. Sor María carried a life punctuated by discipline and ecstasies that later became the base for several attempts at beatification throughout the eighteenth century.⁸⁶

Reluctant parents were also cited in other cases, such as those of Franciscan Luisa de San Antonio, professed in Santa Clara, and Pueblan Isabel de la Encarnación. Luisa was an only daughter and, wanting to be a nun, she escaped from her house to enter the first convent she could find. An unknown woman helped her to find her way to that of Santa Clara, where she stayed.⁸⁷ Isabel de la Encarnación’s parents accepted a marriage proposal for her,

and tried very hard to obtain her consent for it. Her obstinate denial eventually made them drop their plans and support her decision to enter the Carmelites in Puebla.⁸⁸ A similar determination to become a nun was that of another highly born woman, Marcela de Estrada y Escobedo, founder of the Capuchins of Querétaro.⁸⁹ Her biographer presented her case as one who was predestined to become a nun since she was in her mother's womb. One of a triplet conception, she survived, whereas her two male brothers were miscarried. Although there is little information on her vocation as a child, when she made up her mind to profess as a Capuchin her parents were opposed because such a spartan life would not agree with her "delicate complexion." Her mother begged her and warned her that her decision would provoke her father's death. She was quoted as replying that her father's death would not deter her from her resolve. Forsaking a wealthy home, she lived in poverty for seventy-one years as a Capuchin, and on her death the preacher extolled her purity and her exemplary resolution; the wealthier the candidate, the greater the sacrifice. Biographers delighted in such examples of divine calling.⁹⁰

In these cases, as in many others, the assumed docility of women was belied by a firm decision to challenge their parents, supported by an equally strong belief that religion was their calling and the role of bride of Christ their destiny. In biographies and autobiographies, the theme of predestination to become a nun covers the potentially subversive notion that daughters had the right to assert their free will in matters of marriage over the choice of their parents. The concept of marriage itself was not superseded as they entered the cloister to "marry" a divine husband. The challenges to parents and family were excused by their obedience to the call of God. This was a theme with deep roots in sacred biography.⁹¹ It alerts us to the fact that in following the canons of spiritual writing the biographers were also depicting the real ripples and chasms that profession could cause within families.

This sense of predestination also helps to construct an explanation for those young women who initially had absolutely no desire to profess and carried a normal life of social engagements and youthful flirting with the opposite sex until some shattering event turned their eyes and will toward the convent. Sickness, the death of a family member, orphanhood, or a failed love affair moved them to abandon the world. The religious discourse proposed that God worked in his own mysterious ways to persuade those whom he chose to abandon the world, a belief that ran deeply among people in those days. Sor Mariana Josefa Nepomuceno, born in Puebla in 1751 and founder of the Capuchin convent of Guadalupe (1787) in Mexico, was such a case. She loved the world and the possibilities of entertainment and social encounters with members of the opposite sex that were offered her as the sister of four army officers.⁹² She fell in love with an officer who proposed marriage. Unfortunately, through the usual process of investigation preceding marriage, it was learned that he was already married in Spain. She was brokenhearted. According to her biographer, she took the decision to enter the convent after she looked at herself in a mirror and saw a crucifix that ordered her to enter in the Capuchins. Despite her mother's opposition she professed at age nineteen, overcoming several temptations to leave the convent before her final profession. As a religious she sought humble occupations in the kitchen to pay for the many nights that she spent in dances and theatrical performances. Disappointment in love affairs was not behind many professions, but as this case suggests, it accounted for some.

In her autobiography, Sor María Marcela Soria tells the reader with great candor how in her youth she never had the slightest interest in professing during her socially active life in provincial New Spain. She loved dances and parties with her friends and considered herself the antipode of her pious sister. Her father wished to protect her from her many suitors, and once her mother died she was put in charge of a large household as the oldest sister. Her father maintained a close eye on her social activities. Once he was ready, he sought a "concert of wills" with a well-to-do suitor, toward whom she was inclined. In accepting her father's will María Marcela was not forcing herself to accept somebody she disliked. However, in a sudden turn of luck the suitor lost his fortune and property and escaped to Oaxaca, possibly burdened with shame. This abrupt change in her plans led her to begin thinking of the vanities of the world and the appeal of a convent, although she never admitted to a causal relationship between the loss of her suitor and her decision to take the veil. In her recollection, many years later, she tells how God had been "pursuing" her for years and how she had paid a deaf ear to him. When the right moment arrived, she answered the call and remained steadfast to it, even though the suitor "reappeared" at the critical time of her first internment in the convent, trying to tempt her away from her decision.⁹³

Vocation could be stalled by marriage and flourish again when circumstances allowed. Sor Antonia del Señor San Joaquín, born in a landowning family, was assigned a virtuous old woman for her education. She grew up surrounded by piety and propriety. At the appropriate time she was given in marriage to one of her many suitors, with the blessing of the well-known Franciscan Fr. Antonio Margil. Her first husband's death left her a young widow and the mother of a child. A second marriage, and a second child followed. It was an unhappy union and, in common agreement, husband and wife separated to take religious vows. Leaving her two children in the world, she was accepted as a novice in the convent of Santa Clara in Mexico City. Her husband's vocation faltered, however, and he took the unusual step of leaving his convent to reclaim her. So strong were the ties of marriage and social pressure on a married woman that on the advice of her parents, she returned to him and her children, until he died. Having recovered her freedom, she left her son to be educated by her family and took her daughter with her into the convent of Santa Catalina de Sena in Mexico. It almost seemed inevitable that her son became a priest, and her daughter eventually professed. Only then did she take the final vows herself, with her daughter acting as her godmother and her son officiating the mass.⁹⁴ For her biographer this was a classic tale of divine preordination and an example of the power of God in selecting his brides. Obviously, there was an affinity for religious life in the family, but the circumstances of an unhappy marriage helped to intensify it in Sor Antonia.

For piety's sake no story could be better than one of divine intervention to protect the chastity of a woman who intended to become a bride of Christ. The hagiographic pen of Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt narrated the unusual story of Isabel de Jesús, whose parents insisted on marrying her off despite the fact that she declared herself to be already married to Christ. Caught between her duty to filial obedience and her wish to preserve her virginity, she experienced a classic "miracle" the night of her wedding. Before the marriage could be consummated, her husband heard a voice that told him that his wife was not for him. As her biographer would have it, it was the voice of Jesus claiming Isabel. The stunned man made no sexual claims on his wife. On the following morning, Archbishop Francisco Manso was informed of the event. He allowed Isabel to enter the convent of Santa Clara where she took the habit in May 1634, and surprised the witnesses by experiencing an "elevation." That "extraordinary happening" was proof to the Franciscan chronicler that she was God's truest choice among the chosen. The biographer found it unnecessary to provide further information about her "husband" and the real intimate story of this frustrated wedding night will remain unknown to us.⁹⁵ The fact that the archbishop saw fit to annul the marriage suggests that under special circumstances, the profession of a nun could follow the most unusual routes.

Unquestionably, some women were not inclined to marriage. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz enigmatically tells us in her semiautobiographical letter to the Bishop of Puebla, that she felt a total lack of interest in marriage, to which she declared to have "antipathy." Even though some aspects of religious life seemed to her almost as distasteful, she considered it an "honorable" choice.⁹⁶ Few have remarked on the use of that adjective by this famous nun, but it expressed the mentality of a seventeenth-century woman who, like many of her sex, held a high regard for the cloistered life. She never confessed to her readers—maybe even to the majority of her acquaintances—that she was born out of wedlock and that after several years of living in the viceregal court

surrounded by flattery and wealth the likelihood of a marriage might have meant a difficult and possibly unattainable social choice. As her hagiographer put it, in a telling metaphor, her beauty and intelligence were like a white wall begging for a stain. Therefore, several patrons put their resources together and endowed her so that she could profess, thus protecting her with “honor” and respect.⁹⁷

LACK OF VOCATION

What if the young woman did not want to become a nun and was pressured by the family? From the official viewpoint of the church nobody should be forced into a convent. A statement of free will and absence of coercion had to be taken and notarized as part of the reception process.⁹⁸ Yet, reports about forced professions creep out from unexpected sources. These were not stories suitable for the edification of readers and were never narrated for public benefit, although some daring preachers did not hesitate to warn against them.⁹⁹ Cases of forced professions have been extracted from those ecclesiastical records reserved for aberrant cases.

Sor Feliciana de San Francisco was a nun in the convent of Santa Catalina de Sena, Valladolid (Michoacán). On July 18, 1647, she submitted a plea to the highest ecclesiastical court in the bishopric of Michoacán, stating that sixteen years before she had been forced to profess against her will.¹⁰⁰ Born in Spain as the result of an illicit union, of which only the father was known, she was brought to New Spain when her adoptive parents moved to the viceroyalty with the retinue of the Bishop of Michoacán, Fr. Francisco de Rivera. Her adoptive mother was the bishop’s sister. After becoming a widow she tried to incline Feliciana to “the religious state” as soon as she became sixteen, offering her a fixed income, servants, and gifts if she would accede. The girl resisted and, driven by her anger, the adoptive mother revealed to Feliciana her obscure origins. After this, in Feliciana’s declaration, she was physically obliged to enter the convent of Santa Catalina de Sena. Not wanting to be a nun, the girl was far from an exemplary “intern.” The nuns succeeded in making her accept wearing a novice’s habit, not with the intention of making her profess, but to please the bishop and stop the reprimands of her stepmother. Under intense pressure Feliciana also accepted the first profession as a novice. The death of the bishop and his sister in 1637, however, encouraged Feliciana to begin a suit to obtain her freedom. She engaged an excellent attorney, but the episcopal authorities countered his arguments by pitting the honor of the deceased bishop against the word and lack of judgment of a weak woman. Even though the new Bishop of Michoacán favored the solution of this case, it lingered for twenty-three years until 1655, when Sor Feliciana, in a petition written by her own hand, stated she wished to take the vows voluntarily to become a nun. Thus, at forty years of age, on April 15, 1655, she professed as a Dominican nun.

Throughout this process the nuns of Santa Catalina sided with Feliciana. They did not want a scandal in their convent, and were unwilling to force the reluctant novice to profess. To Jorge Traslosheros, historian of this case, Feliciana’s goal throughout many years of resistance within the convent was to have the justice of her case publicly acknowledged by those responsible for her situation. She was also concerned for the salvation of her soul, no small matter for a woman in those days. Were she forced to profess, she believed she would not be saved. After many years, it is possible that she realized the hopelessness of her situation. Lacking any material means or a family in New Spain, a normal and respectable life outside the convent would have been very difficult. Thus, when she accepted profession she reconciled herself to God by becoming a “willing” bride of Christ, and also made the best of her circumstances, staying with the nuns who, after so many years, had become her own and true “family.”

To abandon the convent after taking the novice veil, as attested by Sor Feliciana’s case, was a difficult proposition. Novices without true vocation, or who were found unsuitable for religious life, could leave the convent with the nuns’ and the bishop’s consent. Around 1798, Sor María Francisca de San Felipe de Jesús Morraz y Caballero, who professed in the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia, asked to be “secularized,” that is, to abandon the habit and return to the world as a secular.¹⁰¹ She claimed she had been forced to profess and had failed to protest out of fear. However, being firm in her desire to leave the convent, she stated she had been under constant harassment from nuns and confessors as soon as she made her will explicit. The process of secularization required the nun to prove that she was forced to profess; that she had not taken the final profession, and that she had independent means to sustain herself after she left the convent. Two legal opinions introduced in her case illuminate the train of thinking of those in charge of authorizing secularization. On December 13, 1799, Licentiate Don Juan Cienfuegos argued that he remained unconvinced by her excuse of having been afraid or forced, but given the fact that she showed a lack of understanding of her duties, as well as depression, he would concede the secularization out of charity. This meant he felt the case was not legally substantiated. It seems that this order was carried out, but a second, anonymous commentary on Cienfuegos’ opinion denied that the release was soundly based. Sor María had accepted ten pesos of a pious deed that implied reconfirmation of the vows. By accepting that small sum, she had committed herself to religious life. Her freedom had been forfeited for a pitiful amount of money that she probably needed very badly. It was also stated that she had not proved independent means of income despite the promised, but never delivered, support of the son of the countess of the Presa de Jalpa. Lastly, Sor María did not prove having professed by force or fear. Despite this contrary opinion, this case was decided in the nun’s favor, but it is obvious that secularization was difficult because most ecclesiastic authorities were firmly set against it.

An unfortunate example of this negative attitude was that of Ana Catalina Gutiérrez, a Pueblan novice in the convent of Santa Catalina, and the plaintiff in a suit that went directly to the highest civil court, the Real Audiencia in Mexico, on September 13, 1793.¹⁰² Ana Catalina declared she had been forced to profess by her parents and that she wished to be released from her vows. By 1793, her case was already under way before the ecclesiastical authorities in Puebla. The dogged determination of this woman to leave the convent was met with similar obduracy from the prelates and we owe to both of them the record of this singular case. In her suit Catalina claimed that having found utter procrastination in its resolution, she had decided to appeal directly to the pope and to the Crown. She claimed that neither a papal brief nor a royal cédula recommending her case to the authorities, nor an appeal to the Archbishop of Mexico had yielded any results in having her case examined. The Audiencia wasted no time in ordering an investigation of the case, which it began to unravel in all its complexity.

The proceedings had begun in 1791, when Antonio Ventura de Taranco, Bishop of Puebla, stated that Ana Catalina had taken her first profession under false premises, and had clearly stated she did not feel obliged to follow any of the duties of the religious life. When she entered the convent she was, he asserted, biding time until after the death of her parents to leave it. After her mother’s death she began to request her “freedom.” The bishop argued that she had missed the five-year period of grace that all novices had to recant their first vows according to the Council of Trent (1545–63), and that she was ipso facto a professed nun.

In February 1790, the convent’s chaplain had wanted to release the frustrated novice. He had even been willing to issue a statement on her behalf declaring she was not a nun and should leave the convent because her presence was a source of internal trouble. She swore constantly, badmouthing her sisters and refusing to take communion. The chaplain was afraid she would commit suicide by jumping off the walls or hanging herself. Such was the state of Ana Catalina’s mind that he even offered to pay for the cost of the legal process to get her out and restore peace to the community. This document was sent to Madrid to support the novice’s claim.

As the process took shape in the Audiencia, the Bishop of Puebla was reluctant to admit that he or any other religious authorities had denied help to the novice. He argued that there was no such papal brief as she claimed, but a royal order to look into the case. Matters were made worse by the fact that no lawyer wished to be involved in the “scandalous” case. Catalina’s bad temper, in his view, did not help her cause. In December 1793, the bishop reported that three lawyers had been appointed to her case, but the process was slow.

A gap of six years in the documentation, between 1793 and 1799, suggests both inertia among the authorities and a growing desperation in Catalina. In October 1799, writing from the school of the convent of Jesús María, Ana Catalina addressed the Audiencia, pleading for justice. She related how she had been interned there as a measure of safety and protection, given the fact that she had no family. She claimed that she had not professed and lived “full of bitterness, sadness and affliction, and in danger of losing my soul.” The Audiencia ordered a lawyer, José Mariano Zavaleta, to become her defender. One year later, in November 1800, the Audiencia repeated its order to help the plaintiff, but by May 1801, Ana Catalina was still in Jesús María, complaining of her status. The Audiencia’s efforts to move this case ran against the reluctance of the appointed lawyer, who begged to be relieved from the case, while Ana Catalina penned a letter, in August 1801, asking for a new lawyer since Zavaleta had seen her only once and had not returned in four months. She must have been near desperation, as eight days later, the lawyer informed the Audiencia that Ana Catalina had broken the lock of two doors and escaped. He accused her of having a “manly resolution and an indomitable character.”

The Bishop of Puebla ordered an enquiry to discover her whereabouts. The Crown, speaking through a royal cédula dated March 22, 1802, reminded the bishop that the suit was already eleven years old, and recommended that the “unhappy woman” be spared any violence. What happened to Ana Catalina after her escape from the school where she had been held challenges the imagination and resembles a picaresque novel. As reported on September 10, 1803, she had met a man with whom she had been acquainted before entering the convent, Francisco Lanz de Gandara, and hiding her past, had asked him to take her to Mexico City. According to his declaration, he had taken pity on her and had married her. Six months after their union, celebrated in the church and officiated by a priest, he declared he discovered the papal briefs and the royal cédulas that revealed her past to him.

Ana Catalina was apprehended on August 7, 1803, in Mexico City, and re-interned in the convent of La Concepción, while Francisco, having been accused of “marrying a nun,” was sent into exile to serve in a hospital in the city of Valladolid. From there he wrote the Archbishop of Mexico in December 1804, begging him for the resolution of his case and for his freedom. As for Ana Catalina, the Audiencia continued to give orders to appoint an attorney to take this case, cognizant that many lawyers were reluctant to be involved in it. Apparently, this order was ignored. By late 1803 there was a new bishop in Puebla, Manuel Ignacio González del Campillo, who would be a leading figure in Ana Catalina’s ecclesiastical trial. Like his predecessor, he had no sympathy for a woman whom he described as “alone, resolved, and spiteful, whose perverse inclinations and the true source of her stubborn request to annul her religious profession have been proved by the marriage she has celebrated in the capital.” The misogynist mind-set of these religious men was beyond understanding the plight of a trapped woman.

Finally, in 1806 the case was submitted for consultation to Fr. Cayetano Pallán, Bishop of New Segovia, a master in theology and member of the Holy Office, as well as to a lawyer, Juan Cienfuegos. The outcome of these consultations, ratified by the Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco Lizanna Beaumont, in 1806, was a sharp rebuke to all the arguments waged by Ana Catalina for over ten years, converting her into a pariah within the church and the convent. Her marriage was nullified and she was declared obliged to continue in religious life by virtue of her novitiate vows. She was condemned to rigorous incarceration for one year in the same convent where she had taken her vows, Santa Catalina in Puebla. After that year, she would serve for seven years in the infirmary and be deprived of voice and vote in the community. She was condemned to make a general confession of her life and to make acts of penitence every fifteen days for seven years. She would wear the Dominican habit and join prayers during Mass. The convent of La Concepción would receive 100 pesos in compensation for expenses incurred during her stay there. Notified of the sentence, Ana Catalina signed a statement saying that “she had never been, was not, and did not ever want to be a nun, and did not accept the sentence.” She wanted to live with her husband to whom she was married by the church itself and intended to continue appealing her case.

The man whose crime had been to marry this woman escaped from the hospital in Valladolid where he had been sentenced to serve, only to be caught again. In July 1807, he complained bitterly about his fate. He had lived off the public charity for four years, only to be deprived even of the right to beg and, as he stated, condemned to live “as a wild beast or a madman.” He could not bear the suffering of a “civil death” resulting from an absurd decision. Absurd or not, in July 1808 the secular justice confirmed all aspects of the ecclesiastical decision. That same month, the last evidence of Ana Catalina’s rebellion was a letter in which she “ratified herself as a married woman, a decision she would take again if she could” and declined to sign, “because I do not want to.”

This act of defiance closed this case barely two months before a curate in the town of Dolores would raise his voice against the *gachupines* (peninsular Spaniards) and bad government. At the twilight of the colonial period, this extraordinary case suggests that the diocesan church remained intolerant of any transgression of conventual vows and inflexible about maintaining the public “honor” of the religious life. Ana Catalina’s marriage was an inadmissible betrayal to the obedience she was expected to pay her superiors. She flaunted her free will in the face of men who were still intent on curbing a woman’s will based on the thinnest legal grounds—the irrevocability of vows after a certain period of time. At one point in this process, a legal opinion that such rule applied only to men was dismissed. Having made the mistake of yielding to her parents, she was also mistaken in appealing to the hearts of ecclesiastical authorities. The Crown was certainly more inclined to release her, but the immutability of the church on the issue of female profession was certainly not in tune with the willingness of civil law. While we do not know of her fate, chances are that Catalina lived the rest of her life in the convent, shamed by the community, and possibly remembering her life as a married woman. We will never know if she ever reconciled herself to God. She paid dearly for having the audacity to want to live her life as a free woman.

Catalina’s experience was more exceptional than common. The majority of the nuns lived willingly in their convents, seeking peace with themselves, sorting out all the problems implied in living in closed communities while attempting to achieve spiritual perfection. Being the bride of Christ was not always a smooth sailing for religious women. Once they professed as novices they had to learn their “metiér” as other women had to learn to be wives and mothers. Indeed, their status as brides of Christ and “mothers” to other nuns, as well as inspiration to the faithful who held them in great esteem, demanded a rigorous training and the observance of many rules of self-governance. The period allocated to test their mettle, the novitiate, was only the beginning chapter in an experience that would engage them until their deaths. Their profession was the result of the conjunction of many factors. Some were of a social nature such as concepts of racial exclusivity; economic need, real or imagined; and the view of the men of their race to preserve them from the perceived dishonor of marrying down. For them, as well as for those women who took the veil, the most dignified choice was to embody the aspirations of Christianity in the New World. Other factors were more personal and more ineffable in their nature. The vision of a more perfect life as the bride of Christ was no less real to those who shared it, especially in an age when people were not embarrassed by their own piety and whose open expression of devotion was regarded as fitting the will of God himself. The call of the cloister may not have been heard by most women, but it was a favor that some felt privileged in receiving. The spiritual pull of religious life was, at all times, the essential counterweight of the material aspects of

religious life. It is advisable to remember how both were part of the same reality.

CHAPTER TWO

The Novice Becomes a Nun

“As the happy and desired day arrived, all fears disappeared, all tears ceased, and the soul filled with a serious joy. Thus infused, interiorized, and humble I went into the coro, and then I felt as if all the sun came inside me; the understanding was cleared; the will inflamed, and I saw with the eyes of the soul the divinity of our Lord sitting by my right side.”



On the day of her profession a novice could feel as though the gates of heaven had opened to her. That was the experience of Sor María Marcela Soria when she professed as a Capuchin nun in Querétaro in November 1748. Her expectations soared as she prepared for the day. What she and others may not have clearly surmised at that time was that becoming a nun demanded more than a vocation. It was a process of learning religious rituals, discipline, obedience, and the demands and obligations of daily life unlike those she had known before. The diverse population of professed nuns and their servants made convents resemble small citadels fraught with personal antagonisms and frictions. Power struggles and jealousy undermined the triennial election of prioresses. Financial worries preoccupied the elected officers as well as the individual nuns.¹ When they took their first vow in religion, novices were innocent of such internal struggles and possibly conceived a world like a heavenly city in which the love of Christ would fulfill their life's desires. They learned otherwise during a year of trial, at the end of which their names would be submitted to the community for approval for the final and irrevocable profession.

The novitiate was a period full of personal tensions for the young women whose calling for the religious life they hardly doubted before entering the cloister. Even the most lukewarm belief in the choice of the cloister was grounded on a strong piety developed during childhood and early youth. For others the call was irresistible. However it was felt, vocation was an assumption put under heavy scrutiny by her conventual sisters and by the novice herself. The novitiate meant, above all, learning the Rules of the Order and the internal discipline of the convent, verifying her own vocation by having it tested by teachers and superiors. She also had to develop self-discipline to attain the expected “virtues” of a nun: humility, self-effacement and self-restraint, and obedience. She had to renounce her blood family and adjust her life to living with other women who would be her “sisters” in religion, and her only family for the rest of her life. She had to learn that the conventual walls marked the boundaries of her world forever, and that personal self-containment began with the shrinking of her own living space to that of the cell and the conventual premises. In the novitiate she had to learn the prayers of the services and the routine of the convent throughout the day and the year. There were many religious feasts to be observed, but many acts of discipline and mortification as well. In fact, the hardest part of becoming a nun was the mental and emotional training required to devote herself entirely to achieving the goals of spiritual growth and fulfillment that were laid out by the religious vows that she repeated twice: first during the initial profession as a novice, and again in the final profession. In theory, then, the novitiate was a period of preparation to be part of the religious community, in both body and spirit. This process could be painful in a physical and in a spiritual manner for the novice and the community. The entire convent became aware of the novice's behavior and followed closely her response to her teacher's indoctrination, her adjustment to the routine of the community, and her personal challenges and trials.

The duty of the religious community was to observe the novice and try to discern if she was adjusting to living in the inner sanctum of God's chosen brides, since her ability to learn how to become a nun would last far beyond the trials of the first year. At the end of that year the teacher of novices would have made up her mind about the novice and would submit a report recommending her acceptance or her dismissal. This was the time for the community as a whole to express its opinion on the novice and for individual nuns to cast their votes of approval or disapproval as judges of character and vocation. Their decision of accepting a new sister in religion would affect them all and it was a serious moment for the community as a whole. On her part, the novice's awareness of being on trial could kindle serious self-doubts. While many had members of the family in the convent to confide in, just as many were on their own. Only her confessor could give her some consolation, and even this help may not have been available. By all accounts, this was a period filled with anguish and trials that demands to be examined in detail.

The novitiate has not been explored in depth in any account of conventual life. This testing period, although short in comparison with the long road ahead, opens the gate to understanding how a religious life was shaped at its inception. Material concerns were as important as spiritual ones, as it was with all aspects of religious life. Dowries had to be posted, ethnic affiliation had to be verified, the financial liabilities or advantages of the entrance of another member of the community had to be assessed. At the same time, the foundation of relationships with confessors and other nuns were established and, above all, the construction of a world of spiritual values began. Personal memories, prescriptive literature, hagiobiographical literature, and administrative letters provide a rich picture of this key period in the initiation of a nun's life. These beginnings mark the transition of one world into another; they allow us to see how the character of the novice was shaped, and what the young woman seeking religion found in a place that was not often a “garden” of virgins but a conflictive and challenging place.

BECOMING A NOVICE: MEETING THE REQUIREMENTS

Entrance into the convent was a complex process that involved administrative and ceremonial mechanisms. To fulfill the administrative procedure, all aspirants had to undergo an enquiry into their racial background, birth, willingness to profess, and proof of a virtuous life. Nuns were intensely aware of their racial purity and were intolerant toward any professants with the slightest trace of Indian or African descent. In 1744, some of the nuns of Santa

Clara in Atlixco (Puebla) were most reluctant to admit a candidate whose father was a *castizo*, that is, someone with one Indian grandfather. Despite the fact that he was regarded as “noble” or socially acceptable by most of the community, a secret vote showed eleven negative votes and thirty-one for approval. On a second vote the number of those opposed increased to seventeen with twenty-five in favor. The distressed abbess wrote to her Provincial seeking advice. While we do not know the outcome of this case, it shows how race could become a political issue in a community.²

The second important qualification, that of legitimacy, was routinely followed, except when, occasionally, “natural” or born-out-of-wedlock girls were admitted. As we have seen in Chapter 1, such aspirants had to request dispensation from their “defect of birth” from the Vicar of Nuns or either the bishop or archbishop. Good patronage or the solicitude of a powerful father looking into the future of his “natural” child helped to filter the few admitted under that category. A tolerant church did not mind altering its own rules in this respect. Sheltering women was a charitable and worthy cause, and prelates exercised the social *savoir faire* and reinforced the social network that bonded the elite together. The Hieronymites of San Lorenzo in Puebla admitted at least three nuns of “unknown parents” or “hija natural,” certified to be of Spanish descent.³ Also part of the entrance ritual was the novice’s declaration of free will to enter the convent. Theoretically, the Roman Catholic Church did not wish to admit to its ranks women who had been compelled to profess. A legal statement of free will was mandatory for all novices.⁴ The novice had to submit a petition signed by herself in which she stated that “she had decided to enter as a religious of black veil in the convent” and requested the archbishop to proceed with the formal enquiries, after committing herself to pay her dowry. After having verified her race using a copy of her baptismal records, the Vicar of Nuns took her sworn statement that she was over sixteen years of age and asked if she was aware of the obligations of the religious life. She also had to state that she had “not been forced, advised, threatened or moved by fear or reverence to her parents or any other person,” and was acting on her own will “to seek the salvation of her soul, removed from the snares of the world.”⁵

Verifying the good behavior of an aspirant was not very hard, and it often was based on the testimonies of her confessor or friends of the convent. Families protected the reputation of their daughters by maintaining them behind doors or closely supervised by adults in the family. Written statements attesting the *recogimiento* or sheltered life of a candidate are available for entrance in the convent of Corpus Christi (see Chapter 9), but apparently more informal statements were gathered by the nuns themselves. Sor María Marcela Soria recalled how before her profession some women cast aspersions about her to the Capuchin nuns and how the latter were hesitant about her character and vocation.⁶ Her insistence and time helped the community change its mind about her admission.

To apply for a place, the aspirant was expected to write a short formal request to be admitted into the convent and expressing her desire to fulfill her vocation. The applicants used ritual phrases which the nuns dutifully recorded, such as “since her most tender age she had shown a great desire to become a Discalced Carmelite,” or “she has pretended the habit for many years,” or “she has a strong vocation.” One of them was accepted in April 1693, “on account of being a maiden with all the attributes of virtue and competent age.” María Bernardes, an orphan, declared “such a strong” desire to be a Carmelite that even though she was not yet fifteen, the nuns requested a dispensation to accept her. One century later, in 1793, María Francisca Clemencia asked to be received into the Franciscan convent of Santa Clara, Atlixco, “to fulfill her vocation.” Little had changed over time.⁷ The entry records of all convents stipulated that the novice should stay in the novitiate for one or two years to allow her time to mature and learn the conventual rules and practices.⁸ The application for admission tested the applicants’ reading and writing abilities because literacy was essential to being a nun. Some novices escaped through the cracks, having only a rudimentary literacy that they improved after profession. The women who applied to be “white veiled” or lay sisters were not expected to be educated. They helped with the hardest manual work and lacked voting rights in the convent, and they did not need to learn Latin to follow the services and say their prayers. This lesser category of cloistered women brought a smaller dowry.

Powerful individuals did not hesitate to use their leverage to press the acceptance of a relative or protégée. The Carmelite nuns of San José in Mexico City were not exempt from the pressure of agents who would intercede on behalf of a candidate. Archbishop Francisco Aguiar y Seijas (1682–98) supported the candidacy of Juana de Zúñiga y Toledo to become *capellana* and enter without a dowry. The nuns accepted the will of their superior, but satisfied their own requirements by adding that the aspirant had qualities such as poverty and honesty that merited recognition. This statement saved their faces as a decision-making body and not merely an agent of the archbishop. Despite the rigor of their Rule, the Carmelites attracted several daughters of families of the highest social standing. The spiritual appeal of the Order, founded by Saint Teresa of Avila, enticed girls who could have professed in more affluent and less austere convents. Such were Sebastiana Dávalos y Orozco, and María Ana de Luyando y Bermeo, whose respective fathers were knights of Calatrava. The latter was a twenty-five-year-old widow when she was accepted into the convent in February 1728. Also professed during that period were the daughters of a city councilman and an *alférez* (ensign).⁹

The rate of professions varied from institution to institution and from decade to decade. Typically, convents admitted four or five a year and larger numbers usually occurred during a convent’s formative years or in those convents that had a strong social attraction, such as La Concepción in Mexico City and Puebla, and Santa Clara in Querétaro. Convents registered admissions in books that provide a feeling for the flow of requests. A thirty-five-year record of all professions between 1693 and 1728 in the discalced Carmelites of San José in Mexico City registers the admission of twenty-five novices.¹⁰ Francisco Pardo recorded the entrance of 256 nuns in La Concepción, Puebla, between its foundation in 1593 and 1676.¹¹ Complete series of entrances are unusual and it would be difficult to re-create given the loss or scattering of conventual documentation. One available example is that of San José de Gracia, a midsize convent of the Conceptionist Order. Founded in Mexico City in 1610 under the name of Santa María de Gracia, it admitted thirty-three professants between 1612 and 1623, a rate of admissions it never attained again. Between its foundation and the end of the seventeenth century, San José de Gracia took in 108 professants. Another 132 joined between 1701 and 1821, a rate of just one a year. Twelve were admitted between 1806 and 1821, though there were none during the tumultuous year 1810; however, four entered in 1821, the last year of Spanish rule.¹² Rosalva Loreto López has followed the sequence of admissions for the eleven nunneries in Puebla noting several highs and troughs throughout the seventeenth century, with a definite slow decline toward the end of the eighteenth century among the calced nunneries, with a distinct decline in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the discalced convents had a more even distribution of entrances throughout the century.¹³ A survey of eighteenth-century admissions in five convents by Margaret Chowning shows that some convents, such as Santa Catalina de Sena in Valladolid, Santa Clara in Querétaro, and La Concepción in Puebla, could have as many as thirty novices in a decade in the early eighteenth century.¹⁴ But such peaks could be followed by periods of lesser activity in the admissions. As Chowning points out, variations were due to the mortality of nuns, and the fact that some of the convents were bound to have a fixed number of nuns. In the latter case, only when a nun died could another be admitted. The availability of space in the convent would also play a role. It was not always possible to enlarge the convent to build more cells, a process that some convents obviated by buying property next to the cloister and expanding its area. During the years of the enforcement of a change in observance (1770–1780), the number of aspirants declined in all convents because novices were hesitant about the changes introduced by the innovation.¹⁵ Altogether, the flow of novices into convents was a variable that still presents problems of historical reconstruction. Doubtless, the number of nuns living in a convent

changed the character of life within. Overpopulated nunneries were a constant source of worry for prelates, who saw in such large numbers a challenge to the spiritual side of religious life. Overpopulation in the cloisters was not due to the admission of nuns, but to the large number of servants and protégées living within, and it was a fact beyond the personal process of admittance of the novice, whose steps we are following.

THE CEREMONIAL

Having fulfilled all the necessary requirements, the ceremony of first profession became the first main event in the life of the future nun. It varied according to the convent and the wealth of the professants. Like a wedding, it called for the display of the family status through details such as purchasing a rich dress for the novice, inviting a large number of guests, and serving refreshments in the convent's parlor. The display of emotions by the family, although spontaneous, could add to the theatrical nature of the event. Each religious order had its own ritual for the first and final professions: two different ceremonies, insofar as the first did not guarantee the latter. Doubtless, dozens of novices entered the convents with a minimum of public display, but others' entrances were sumptuous, especially in the eighteenth century, when they could be quite flamboyant. The chronicler of the city, José Manuel de Castro Santa Anna, described the first profession of twenty-year-old Josefa Malo y Castro in the discalced Carmelites on February 2, 1757. She was the daughter of the late Pedro Malo de Villavicencio, ex-president of the Audiencia of Guadalajara and a Knight of the Order of Calatrava, whose widow made sure that the ceremony met the high family standards. Josefa was "richly dressed with pearls and precious stones, and wore a new formal dress with gold tissue and velvet, granate-red in color, and Milan lace trimmings worth over 1,000 pesos. It was later dedicated to church ornaments. The attendance included the cream of society."¹⁶

Ceremonies of this nature showed an overlapping of the mundane and the spiritual. In the Dominicans of Santa María de Gracia, in Guadalajara, the novice, richly dressed and accompanied by her godmother, visited the bishop to request his blessing. The godmother in this and all cases could be the professant's own mother or any other member of the family. The chaplains of the convent waited for the novice in the church with crosses and candles, blessed her with holy water, and led her to the altar, where she asked for the blessing of the Holiest. From the church she went into the convent, walking amidst a throng of onlookers and listening to the music played for the occasion. Having reached the convent, she knelt before the half-open door where the abbess asked her three times: "What is the bride looking for?" to which she answered: "The mercy of God." The door was then fully opened and the abbess and sub-abbess gave her flowers and a candle to welcome her. The rest of the nuns accompanied her in a procession to the choir of the convent, where she removed her clothes and put on the habit. She returned to the door where the priest placed a scapular on her. When the public ceremony ended, the aspirant receded into the convent. Eight days later her hair was cut and she began her life and learning as a novice.¹⁷

Two autobiographical accounts that survive reveal the aspirant's emotions on the day of her profession. One is by Sor María de San José, a discalced Augustinian in Puebla, the other by Sor María Marcela Soria, a Capuchin in Querétaro. Sor María de San José traveled from her home, a rural hacienda near Puebla, to that city, accompanied by her siblings and friends. Her destination was the convent of Santa Mónica where she had wished to profess for many years. She did so the day of the feast of Saint Nicholas Tolentino, September 10, 1687, in a ceremony marked by stark simplicity since she was the second nun in her family, and had encountered many obstacles to her profession. As she later wrote:¹⁸

As I stood at last before the entrance, the door suddenly opened, and because of the great joy and happiness I felt in my soul, it seemed to me the very doors of heaven had opened to me. As soon as I went in the door shut, and I went about embracing every one of the nuns as is always done when a nun enters. When this ceremony was completed, the Mother Director . . . brought me to the grille so that I could say good-bye to my sisters and to the other people who accompanied me . . . I began to sob without being able to help it because at the moment this occurred I felt such a great force and violence that it was as if each part and member of my body was creating its own grief and resistance to remove this love for my family from my heart.

One of the purposes of the novitiate was to cut the candidate's ties with her natural family and help her to accept the community as her only family. The abbess consoled María and reminded her that her tears may suggest to others that she was unhappy about entering the house of God. She suppressed them and proceeded to "bid them good-bye very quickly." She was then taken to the upper choir where she was dressed in her habit and taken through the convent to become familiarized with it. That afternoon there was a modest celebration. Sor María de San José was offered the nuns' traditional beverage, hot chocolate, which she had shunned throughout her life. Her first act of obedience was to drink it and savor some sweets cooked for the occasion.

Capuchin Sor María Marcela remembered vividly her first profession. She professed in the Capuchins of Querétaro on July 25, 1748, on the feast of the Apostle Santiago. The town was celebrating the saint's day and it was teeming with people, some of whom came to witness the ceremony. She had waited for over a year and a half for the admission. Her unhappy father and siblings had not reconciled themselves with her decision. Accompanied by her sister, who acted as godmother for the ritual, she took her last ride in the city. Her coach followed a certain route, along which people would gather to see the display of the young novice-to-be. While some families saw the profession as a source of pride and piety, in María Marcela's case it was a sad occasion punctuated by the tears of her siblings and the absence of her older brother, who disapproved of her decision.

As she entered, she heard the antiphony *Veni Sponsa Mea* being sung inside, and in her awe, she was moved to beg the abbess to let her walk on her knees toward the choir. Her desire was not granted. The ritual had a precise routine which should not be broken, even as a display of humility. Sor María Marcela was honest enough to describe the fears she began to experience the minute the nuns started to undress her and she realized that soon she would be one of them. She pretended she was happy when she appeared in the habit in the grille to bid farewell to her father and siblings.

But, oh misery, oh infected nature! My strength lasted only until they began to strip me of my jewels and worldly ornaments . . . One nun took off her veil to help undress me. As soon as I saw her habit I began to consider that I would look like her, and my pleasure turned into sadness; my consolation into affliction, and the vocation into regret. These sentiments were so strong that I almost asked them that instead of undressing me they should open the door and let me return to my home. If I did not do this, it was because I controlled myself. I went to the grille feeling like a dark night, but dissimulating so well that nobody learned anything. Sadness was covered with modesty, and regret with silence, two virtues that everybody began to admire in me. They [the nuns] took me to the novitiate where I was alone because there was no other novice. My teacher was saintly and affable. She asked me several questions inquiring if I was happy. I told her yes because although I was tempted, I dissimulated and remained

silent, and to this day nobody knew that the habit was burning me, I could not stand the bed, I loathed the food, and ate nothing. The hours in the choir were like centuries.¹⁹

Her relatives stayed for five days and visited her in the grille, after which time, believing that she was happy, they left. From then on, Sor María Marcela had to face her novitiate and her feelings on her own.

LEARNING THE ROPES AND TESTING THE WILLS

With the departure of families and friends, the trying period of novitiate began. If the family lived in the same city, they could visit the novice as frequently as the convent allowed, which was only every few months. Blood ties had to be supplanted by community ties. What could replace family and the world? What were they taught toward that end? What contingencies did novices face during their learning period? There was no universal agreement on how to teach a novice to become a nun. Each convent had its own method of teaching, about which we have much less information than would be desirable. The intellectual content of a novice's learning was limited: the Rule of the convent; the rituals of the church, as experienced in conventual life; and above all, the essence of her vows, which obliged her to obedience, humility, poverty, and chastity. Breviaries of prayers helped her to learn that important aspect of the communal ritual. This training was about observance and discipline, not about learning theology. The selection of teacher of novices did not seem to have followed special guidelines or required specific training. While the Rules of some convents stated that older and wise nuns should be assigned to this task, this was not always the case. An experienced nun was favored over younger ones but she did not have to be "older." Sor María Lino de la Santísima Trinidad, founder of the convent of La Purísima Concepción in San Miguel el Grande, was made teacher of novices when she was hardly twenty-two years old, only eight months after her own profession in 1752. She remained in that position for nine and a half years. Obviously, her appointment was due to her being the founder, and we can only assume that she must have learned her métier during the period of service.²⁰

Under more common circumstances the teacher of novices was appointed by the conventual hierarchy composed of the abbess and her advisors. Like others in the nunnery, the position rotated every few years among the senior nuns. Although they seemed to have been infrequent, irregularities in the appointment took place, as illustrated by the case of Sor María Lino. There was also the case of the Indian convent of Nuestra Señora de Cosamaloapán in Michoacán. In the 1730s and 1740s it experienced serious internal problems, and the appointment of teacher of novices was challenged by the indigenous nuns and novices, who complained to the religious authorities that the teacher of novices, an española (unmixed Spanish descent) by origin, was inadequate, being very young and hardly an expert in the rules of observance.²¹ She had been appointed only because of her race.

The relation between teachers and novices was one of complete authority for the former and complete obedience for the latter. As such, there were many opportunities to exercise undue control over the novices in the process of teaching them. Accounts of the tensions caused by the obedience the novices owed their teachers and their sometimes rigorous methods of indoctrination indicate that not all was peace and harmony. Unquestionably, teaching novices was a difficult assignment, although the biographical and conventual literature strove to present a rosy and pious portrait of the teacher of novices. Of Sor Ana de la Presentación, of the convent of San Lorenzo in Mexico City, the preacher who extolled her virtues stated that, as a teacher of novices, she never applied any "mortification" that she had not experienced first herself.²² Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora quoted Sor Tomasa de Ildefonso, one of the chroniclers of the convent of Jesús María, who praised Sor María Antonia de Santo Domingo:

She taught her disciples and novices with such great care, charity and love, as if they were born of her entrails. She did not spare any trouble to make good nuns of them and make them fulfill their duties with exactitude. There was no day in which she did not teach them in prolix detail all sorts of things and the ceremonies of religion, making them aware of all to which they had committed themselves, and what a high dignity [it] was being the Brides of Jesus-Christ . . . She also persuaded them to be humble, and to love each other . . . Her most common advise was that they should try to live a life away from intercourse with the world. This would lead them to love each other in God, which is the most powerful tool to combat the factionalism that introduces laxity in the monasteries.²³

In a nutshell, that was the teacher's agenda: teach ceremonial and religion, inculcate knowledge on the uniqueness of their chosen state, and preach tolerance for each other. Discipline, however, could not be forgotten. Sor María Antonia was said to have imposed discipline with severe warnings followed by expressions of love, and, according to the chronicler, she earned the love of her novices. This might have been the case, but while some conventual sources gilded reality, others did not hide the unpleasantnesses, although they presented them as part of a process of spiritual purification. Unquestionably, the discipline was severe and it is not difficult to find examples of rigor in the training of novices as well as discontent among them. On the training of Doña Leocadia González Aranzamendi, professed in the Capuchin convent of Mexico City in 1666, the conventual chronicler Sor María Teresa said, in 1733: "She suffered more than enough painful mortifications; she was commonly treated with harsh words and made to go without her veil, a distressing penitence for a religious, as all who direct their souls know." But she adds, explaining the purpose of mortifying the novice: "God wished to gain a bride truly married to his wounds."²⁴

A rare glimpse into the process of training in the spiritual life is contained in a small book of pedagogic guidance to the novices of unknown provenance, in the form of a letter possibly written in the eighteenth century. It offers an intimate vision of the pedagogical philosophy of the person who wrote it, who could well have been a confessor, and emphasized the benefits and rewards derived from their chosen life.²⁵ The novice's first duty, according to this source, was to travel into her inner world and meditate on the benefits granted by God. This advice followed the doctrine of recogimiento (gathering into oneself) and meditation that was the pillar of early-sixteenth-century Spanish spirituality and continued to be one of the key features of post-Tridentine indoctrination. To learn how to carry out mental prayer, as opposed to verbal prayer, was not an option, but an essential need for a nun. Living in the "security of a safe port," her duties were to pray in the Lord's garden, to live in virtue, and to exercise herself in the road of perfection. Meditation and prayer would lead to the understanding of her decision to profess. She should pray for the gift "of fervor and devotion for everything celestial and eternal [and] the great gift of the ultimate perseverance." To remain assured and confident of her choice was essential. "As a bride of Christ," stated the writer, "you liken yourselves, oh sainted virgins, to the angels, with the invaluable jewels of your purity," and "you partake of the same relationship the church had to God." Being chosen, however, she had to be willing to endure many personal sacrifices. The greatest was to deny everything to herself and to embrace the cross of Christ. This renunciation was easier to achieve within the walls of the cloister, where one could

see the world as the illusory thing it really was. Assuming that her vocation was firm, the writer was confident that the novice would learn how to despise everything she left behind in the world and thank God for having brought her into the convent. The writer put in the lips of the novice a prayer that would reflect her humility and her gratitude:

From here, my Divine Spouse of my very soul, most kind, sweet and loved Savior of mine; from here, in solitude, I will listen to your voice quietly, and will communicate with you with the frankness and sweetness that you reserve for your beloved solitary souls. Here I am, small and poor, humble, a sinner from the very beginning, and altogether a miserable daughter of Adam, heir to his fragility; but a creature of yours, redeemed with the blood of the immaculate lamb.²⁶

Thus, once in the care of her Lord, the novice was advised to request from God consolation for the family she had left behind, who suffered her absence. This recommendation contradicted the teaching of sterner prelates and teachers who instructed professing nuns to forget their family ties. While the writer had recommended despising all that belonged to the outside world, there was in this duty toward her family a sympathetic understanding of the loss that the clausturation of a daughter meant for siblings and parents. She would never return to her home and would be considered dead and entombed in her convent. This letter exudes a terse serenity, expressed without the verbal exaggerations and theatricality of intent and nuance that characterize some of the sermons and conventual chronicles. Conveyed in unaffected language, this pithy manual guided the novice firmly to the understanding of her duties and rewards. It mixed a mentoring tone with the intimacy of a prayer and uplifting words of praise. The author fondly addressed the recipient as “Doña Marianita,” but never lost authority despite the understanding of the stressful period of initiation in the religious life.

The gentle hand that addressed “Doña Marianita” is not evident in a manual of instruction for novices written by Sor Manuela de San Antonio, of the convent of San Bernardo in Mexico City, in 1744.²⁷ This was not a spiritual treatise, but a book on discipline and behavior in the convent that revealed a stern teacher conscious of her duty to train the novices in the protocol they had to follow in their daily lives. The first rule was to keep silence in the coro, the dorms, and the refectory. Novices should not speak to the professed nuns unless they were spoken to. They should sleep in separate beds and with their habits on. Anyone staying for too long in the coro, engaged in her own prayers, would be punished by being compelled to eat from a dish placed on the ground (*comer en tierra*). Doing everything as the rule stated was essential in the process of learning. Novices should not cause any trouble, and should expect corrective measures if they misbehaved. They should kneel before the abbess or her assistant if reprimanded. They should never reveal the secrets of conventual life to any secular person or receive anything from anybody without permission of their teacher. When a professed nun died, they were to pray a rosary for her soul. Novices should never be idle and should remember they were the lowest members of the convent. Sor Manuela stressed this by repeating the message of humility that novices should remember: “They were garbage, and nothing in the convent.” This comment corroborates the notion of the novitiate as a challenge, even for those selected few with a very strong vocation. Denial of their own free will was a foundational principle insofar as it promoted obedience and discipline, and the teacher of novices’ main task was to remind her charges that they should be silent, humble, and compliant to any order from their superiors. She aimed at curing personal pride and teaching collegiality by denial of any personal agency. If the novice succeeded in learning such “virtues,” she would become a good member of the community. The manual also instructed the novice on how to confess her transgressions in the days allocated for general confession before the community. Public confession was assumed not to be an easy task, which indeed it was not. It was a humbling experience that, by attracting attention to one’s own weaknesses, proposed to educate the character of the transgressor in the need to depend on the forgiveness of others. It followed a ritual formula:

My most Reverend Mother and my Lady: I confess my guilt to Our Lord and to Your Reverence and the many faults and defects which I have incurred, in special, disobedience to all that I understand is the will of God and Your Reverence. I confess the guilt of lack of silence, which I have broken everywhere. I should have kept it and I have not. I confess the guilt of sight, movement and talking, which I have not exercised as befits a true servant of Our Lord. I confess my guilt on the things commended to me, which I have not done as I am obliged. I confess my guilt on the lack of peace and charity that I have had towards my mothers and my sisters . . . I beg forgiveness, and correction from Your Reverence, and discipline for the love of God.²⁸

The education of the novice was a communal process, but the preceding works suggest that personal advice through a teacher or a confessor was just as important. In fact, they balanced each other. This is evident in the treatise written by Fr. Cayetano Antonio Torres, spiritual director of the Capuchin convent of San Felipe de Jesús, in Mexico City.²⁹ A long-winded essay, it covered point by point a diversity of subjects to help the novice learn the daily rituals and ease her into conventual life. He underlined the assumption that a novice had to be good-natured to undertake the religious life. The loving quality of the teacher of novices was also another desirable qualification, because she had to treat her charges as a loving mother. One important point was to understand that the confessor and the teacher of novices should work together, but under the hierarchical concept of religious authority. The teacher of novices, being a woman, should not forget that her indoctrination should be complementary to the instruction of the spiritual father’s guidance. Torres recommended charity toward each other, the cultivation of obedience, moderation in the observance, and the exact fulfillment of the Order’s Rules. The Rules could be softened by the personal touch of the abbess or the teacher of novices. In contrast, a disciplinary streak in the teacher could reinforce the constrictive nature of the novitiate. In either case, being a teacher of novices was not a task to be lightly taken or even liked by those appointed to it. Being a teacher of novices could mean a heavy responsibility for any nun, for the success of the novices was assumed to be, to a large extent, in her hands. When Sor María Marcela, the Capuchin from Querétaro, was appointed teacher of novices, she was awed by the responsibility and commended herself to the Virgin. Then, she wrote, she had a vision that gave her great comfort.

The third [vision] was the day I was elected as teacher of novices . . . As soon as my name was read I commended my office to the Virgin Mary, and while I was doing this in the coro I saw myself in the novitiate, and I saw everything surrounded by high walls; and on one side was the Most Holy Trinity; on the other the Virgin Mary, my Lady, and my Lord Saint Joseph, and on the third, my Lord Saint Michael, and lastly, my Angel Custodian, and it was revealed to me that it pleased God that I would be teacher, and I was very consoled.³⁰

Nevertheless, she still felt that she was not the most appropriate person to teach novices. “Being appointed teacher I did not feel pain or happiness. I felt great embarrassment, but I did not want anybody to know about it; the community would not be misjudged for having appointed me when there many others more suitable. I did not write my siblings about it and I was so embarrassed that I blushed before the other religious and hid from them.”

Between 1705 and 1706, Sor María de San José, writing to her confessor, Plácido Olmedo, discussed at length the problems she was experiencing, as a teacher of novices, with one of them.³¹ At the time she was among the founding nuns of the discalced Augustinian convent of Nuestra Sra. de la Soledad in Oaxaca. Her obsession with the novice’s character and behavior reflects how important she considered her role to be. It was essential for a newly founded convent to grow through the attraction of novices. The convent had received six, too few for its own future. She was happy with five of them whom she called “precious” and with “lovely gifts.” The one who preoccupied her was a native of the city, whose ability to follow the Rules was deteriorating. This she attributed to the rather limited understanding of the people of the area, a bias that many others in New Spain held against the *oaxaqueños*. It seems that the novice and the Mother Superior were both on a collision course. Owing complete obedience to the latter, the novice turned sullen and unresponsive to the spiritual aspects of religious life. She was probably confused and unsure of her vocation. While Sor María de San José typically attributed the novice’s poor and erratic performance to the ministries of the devil, she wrote to her confessor that she really tried to find out what was inside her mind in order to help her to find meaning in religious life and prevent her from becoming a source of bad influence in the community. She prayed to see a sign from God to confirm that he was trying her with a stubborn novice. When she finally had a word from God on the matter, he admonished her about her accountability as responsible for the souls and consciences of her pupils. She wrote that the Lord had explained to her that she was the tree and the branches, and the novices the fruit. The novices were like linen and unfinished wood, and she was the skilled crafter who would transform them into finished pieces.³²

She also had to deal with another case of a novice who, having been admitted to serve as a white-veil sister to serve the community, seemed to have been “confused by the devil,” and threatened to leave the community unless she would be admitted to the more prestigious state of black-veiled nuns. Not unpredictably, Sor María’s anxiety over this issue was resolved by another direct message from God, who gave her to understand that the travails she experienced were part of her role as mother of her novices. As she put it, God told her that: “You shall have to give birth to your novices not once, but many times, with pangs and tears.” Sor María de San José found sustenance, strength, and an explanation for her anguish as a surrogate mother. The maternal bonds that tied novice and teacher were part of the process of nurturing that some gifted nuns understood as they thought and wrote about it. The persistence in obtaining the desired fruit was part of her convictions as a nun, and part of her role as a teacher of novices, but in her writing María de San José also clarified the issue of control and authority that her putative motherhood implied. As a teacher of novices, she said she was glad “to see the blind obedience with which she did everything I ordered her to do.” She was also happy to witness the novice’s silence, but as their relationship soured, the nun acknowledged that the novice had changed so radically that it did not make a difference whether she was treated well or severely. This was trying for her. María de San José got angry at times and referred to the obstinate novices as “donkeys” and “mules.” For her part, the recalcitrant novice who gave her so much trouble seemed to have been using her own tactics of rebellion such as weeping incessantly or laughing without any reason, while remaining unreceptive to the teacher’s attempts to understand her feelings. The outcome of this contest between teacher and novice is uncertain but it illustrates the bitterness and frictions hidden behind the apparent peace of the cloister. There was, however, an ultimate desire to sublimate such outbursts of anger or rebellion as part of a sacrifice to be endured by all parties concerned. What triggered such disaffection and even estrangement in the teaching of religious life remains much of an enigma, but the teacher of novices, as well as the abbesses and elder nuns, believed that strict discipline was a good training experience, not only to test their mettle and perseverance, but also to strengthen their character. Novices also needed to understand that obedience was a nun’s most important asset if the community was to maintain its internal order.

Teachers acted in good faith, even though harshly or at times without a trace of compassion. Years after their profession some nun still remembered the incidents and accidents of their novitiate. Most extolled them as a way of learning humility and obedience. Sor María Marcela Soria, who in time became a teacher of novices herself, remembered the humiliations inflicted upon her:

I proceeded with my novitiate, and had much to be punished for. Three other novices came in and because they had protectors within [the convent] my teacher did not punish their faults and instead she charged me, to the point that I received penitence for faults no graver than those the others had incurred, and she begged my forgiveness and asked me that it be kept from the community because such occurrence had never taken place in the novitiate. Once she asked me to ring the bells at eleven, and because I forgot she ordered nine disciplines, and everything was like this. Another day I was cleaning pots in the kitchen and she rubbed my face with a rag full of lard and soot. It was about two o’clock, and she made me wash to attend vespers, and she was in a tight spot because the soot could not be cleaned, and she was sorry that the community should see me like that because all loved me. I was hurt by everything that happened to me because I was naturally sensitive, but while I was hurt I kept silence and suffered because since the beginning I put all my will on these two virtues.³³

While discipline, punishment, and antagonism were not alien to the teacher–novice relationship, it could also generate affective bonds. Sor Lorenza Bernarda, abbess of the Capuchin convent of Mexico City, was in correspondence with the Puebla philanthropist Doña Ana Francisca Zúñiga y Córdoba, who sent gifts to the convent and who hoped to promote a Capuchin convent in Puebla.³⁴ Between 1689 and 1695, the nun and the patroness exchanged letters with news about the hoped-for new foundation and the quality of the novices in the Mexico City convent. Doña Francisca’s letters have been lost, but those of Sor Bernarda Lorenza remain as an unusual testimony of an abbess who had to judge true vocations. In 1689 she tells her correspondent about a novice who had been denied entrance into the convent as a means to test her will and vocation. Even though they lived in a world in which religious vocations were assumed to be a natural happening, the nuns had to exercise much caution in deciding whom to admit, because some girls falsely believed they had received the call. “To learn who are those most suitable is the most difficult thing to discern. Those who are the first in line must have such perfect gifts as strength and health, and above all the blood, because the blood sustains everything.”³⁵ Exactly what was “the blood” for Sor Bernarda Lorenza? Possibly an inner and difficult-to-describe strength which ran in the veins of the novice with the true vocation.

In her letters Sor Bernarda Lorenza disclosed the characteristics of desirable novices and some of her own intuitive judgment on their performance. In July 1690, there were four novices in the Capuchin convent. One was very special. She was the niece of Doña María, the wife of Captain Joseph de Retes, who as a nine-year-old had begged for the habit.³⁶ Her insistence bent the will of the Archbishop of Mexico, who allowed her to enter the convent as a novice. She turned out to be “beautiful and a capable reader of Spanish and Latin and with a talent above her years.” The abbess and her teacher followed attentively the novice’s progress in her education, looking for personal character and potential weaknesses and strengths. Among the

qualities she mentioned as desirable in a novice, perseverance was very important. It would sustain her will to carry through her intentions against all odds. A “good nature” (*natural lindo*) indicated a flexibility to adjust to the discipline of the convent and the inner discipline required for the spiritual life. Sor Lorenza Bernarda refers enthusiastically to one novice, Sor Oliva, who “thanks to God, is doing very well. She has not failed to attend matins (early evening prayers) or carry out the fasting since she began, and is of humble and good nature, which is the foundation of all virtue. She has spent one week in the kitchen with great joy. May God grant her perseverance.”³⁷ She repeated her praise of the same novice in another letter: “Blessed be the Lord, because this must be his work. She has spent advent without eating a single egg, just vegetables and fish, and since she entered she has not missed matins a single day of her fast, and with such joy that she has all of us very edified, even though this bothers her because she is so humble.”³⁸

The fact that a novice could follow observance with such determination and in such good spirit was important for the rest of the community. It was a sign of having a true vocation. The abbess was impressed and she believed that the novice’s example of piety and discipline was a model to others, especially since her initiation in the rigors of discalced life was so recent. The community that would serve as a final judge could, in turn, be instructed by a novice, a process of “cross-fertilization” of the highest importance in a closed religious community, where all were important and accountable to each other. Teaching in this Capuchin community was carried out by example, and not by following a specific rule. At least, that is the impression that the abbess gave the patroness, Doña Francisca, when the latter asked for a copy of the Rule of the Capuchins. In a letter dated November 26, 1696, Sor Lorenza Bernarda denied her a copy of the Rules, because not even in Toledo, where she came from, was this admissible. “In our religion [meaning the Order] it is not customary to give the rules out to any aspirants. I have not seen this neither in Toledo nor here, because we first aim at having them [the novices] learn with deeds rather than reading; otherwise we read them [the Rules] at the Refectory. Until they profess [final profession] it [the book of the Rule] is not given to the novices.”³⁹ For Sor Lorenza Bernarda, the prospect of sending some of her novices off to a potential future foundation led her to formulate, in one letter, her feelings about them and the impact their departure would have on her. It would be like “tearing pieces of my heart, those which by nature are closest to it, and a heavy test, although the consideration that it is the will of God makes me accept it.”⁴⁰ She felt like a mother to all and felt her ministry very deeply.

Other exigencies of the novitiate are reflected in biographies and autobiographies. Writing about Sor María de Jesús Tomellín (an exceptional nun in the convent of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción, in Puebla), her biographer, Fr. Francisco Pardo, stated that during the novitiate she took long and cruel disciplines, and on account of their rigor the blood covered the virginal body.⁴¹ Sor María had entered the convent against the wishes of her father, who planned to marry her to a rich man who was hoping for her hand. She tricked the nuns into letting her enter the cloisters and succeeded in remaining, professing on May 17, 1599. The disciplines she inflicted on her body were voluntary, and never a *prescribed* part of the novitiate. Sor María was not alone in her desire to “punish” her body. It was part of the practices of asceticism that some individuals believed to be the best way of imitating Christ. Leocadia G. Arzamendi, as a Capuchin novice in Mexico City, disciplined herself so harshly that her body was covered with ulcers, a fact that the community disregarded and that did not impede her final profession. The rigor of self-discipline was in vogue in the seventeenth century, when Catholic spirituality found inspiration in the wounds of Christ and his human suffering during his Passion. Paintings of Christ tied to the pillar of the condemned, where he suffered the lashes of his torturers, and the more common icon of Christ on the cross bathed in his own blood were abundant in the convents and served as an uplifting source for personal devotion. Body flagellation was also a means of fortifying the spirit against nagging self-doubts about vocation and lack of spiritual inspiration. Many professed nuns made routine use of flagellations in their penance rituals and their example was a learning experience for the novices. José Luis Sánchez Lora argues that Spanish seventeenth-century religion stressed violence to the body as a form of expiation.⁴²

The rules that guided the teaching of the novice to become a professed nun remained unchanged throughout the colonial period. The panegyric sermon for Sor Inés Josefa del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, who professed in Santa Teresa la Nueva, Mexico City, in the mid-eighteenth century, extolled her novitiate as a probation period “fertile in mortifications” that refined her virtues.⁴³ Equally praiseworthy was the novitiate of Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, of the Franciscan convent of San Juan de la Penitencia. At her funeral, she was remembered as a nun who was inclined to “mortifying” herself, a practice she acquired during her novitiate.⁴⁴ Before her final profession, she asked her teacher to order a medical exam for her, to obviate any doubts about her health.

While the “heroic virtues” of the uncommon novices were held as models for imitation, there were others who were less exemplary and more human, and who suffered serious doubts about their vocations or incurred human frailties that belie the idealized portrait left by some biographers. In their cases, such doubts were regarded as divine tests to try the mettle of their faith and determination. As a novice in Santa Catarina de Sena, in Mexico, Sor Mariana de Santo Domingo came near to leaving the convent. “Miraculously,” the Virgin Mary appeared to her and warned her that abandoning the convent would mean her condemnation. This divine sign changed her mind, and she asked her abbess to go ahead with her profession, already delayed by two months because of her hesitation.⁴⁵ More complex and interesting is the case of Sor Josefa Clara de Jesús María, a novice in the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia, who was investigated by the Inquisition in 1747. The Holy Office investigation was prompted by the rumor that she had suffered a miraculously fast recovery of some red welts in her face.⁴⁶ The origin of the marks remains a mystery and they could have been the marks of slaps inflicted by the teacher of novices, Sor María de San Pedro, her “mother” in religion. Such acts of discipline were not unknown in the cloister. Having probed into the case, the Inquisition determined that any irregularity in the observance of internal discipline was not part of its purview. The allegation of a miraculous cure was something else, but having found nothing convincing, and with the case well contained within the walls of the convent, it was declared beyond the competence of the Holy Office.

In the process of training novices, some older nuns took a newly arrived girl under their protective wings. In some instances the novice was a member of their own family and there was a natural nexus established during the apprentice process. The older nun was addressed as “mother” and became a mentor and confidant. If the novice had grown up in the convent, as was sometimes the case, she could be “adopted” by an elder nun since childhood. Some male prelates did not view those close relationships as edifying or leading to an exemplary religious life. The seventeenth-century Franciscan moral theologian, Antonio Arbiol, was one of them. He thought that “mothering” led to factions and partisanship in the convent, especially at elections, when the “mothers” would expect support from their “daughters.” For him, the adjectives “mine” and “yours” among nuns were frivolities that the founding fathers of Christianity, such as Saint John Chrysostom, had condemned.⁴⁷ Arbiol was not far off mark in pointing at the persistence of mothering relationships, since they had survived for centuries regardless of criticism from male prelates. Small circles of nuns and novices existed in all convents and they may be accountable for some of the political maneuvers behind elections for offices in the convent, as well as for special affective networks developing against all ecclesiastical advice.⁴⁸

Although mothering was part and parcel of the social life in nunneries, sometimes such relationships became conflictive. The maternal feelings

harbored by some teachers were not necessarily found in all of them. One example of a relationship gone sour was that of Sor María de San Pedro, teacher of Sor Josefa Clara de Jesús María, both of the Franciscan convent of San Juan de la Penitencia. Sor María took her case to the Inquisition, following an inner drive of “scrupulosity” or deep concern about the correctness of observance. She declared to the Inquisitors that her spiritual “daughter” gave a bad example to the convent. She had a “bad character,” found occasion to fight with other nuns, and took personal gossip to the abbess who, in turn, punished other novices. If we believe this statement, the abbess was not herself a pillar of equity ruling over a kingdom of peace and harmony, and did not investigate rumors brought by a novice before taking punitive action. Sor Josefa Clara, her teacher stated, took too much care of herself and was fond of ornaments. She let her hair show under her veil and demanded a serge habit for her profession rather than the common cloth, in disregard of the fact that serge was very expensive. While Sor Josefa Clara may not have been a model of virtues, the anger of the teacher could have been the result of the natural impatience of an older woman facing the coquetry of a young novice not yet adapted to the rigors of conventual life.⁴⁹ Testimonies of other nuns began to pile against Josefa Clara’s character. Five nuns who had known her in the novitiate declared that she was disobedient, vain, irritable, and inclined to answer her teacher back. However, when the Inquisition began its investigation of the case, thirty-eight of the forty-four nuns declared that while the novice had no “particular virtue” there was nothing “peculiar” about her. This show of solidarity worked in favor of Josefa Clara. Inquisitorial visits were to be avoided by all available means to avoid public gossip and a stain on the public reputation of the convent.

San Juan de la Penitencia was a Franciscan convent under the jurisdiction of Provincial Fr. Bernardo de Arriata, who followed this case closely. He was naturally concerned about the upheaval within the community and the Inquisitorial investigation, but he was also annoyed at the nuns “importuning me with their writings, and asking that since the novice had already been one year in the convent, she should be permitted to make her solemn profession.” Obviously the nuns of San Juan de la Penitencia resented the meddling of male authorities in their internal affairs and were rallying behind the novice, pressing the issue of her profession to save their right to decide the fate of Josefa Clara with their own votes. Arriata wrote of “scandal” and “lack of obedience” on July 18, 1747, an opinion that was echoed by other friars consulted on this case. This turned into a gender-based contestation, but in the end the nuns had their way. The Franciscan prelates advised them to carry on with the final profession in the hope that it would be “for the greater glory of God.” It also would stop the Inquisitorial investigation and the commotion in the convent.

The examination of this novice by her spiritual advisors bears further scrutiny because it also revealed something about the sexuality of the professants, a troubling and thorny matter that remained closeted in the convent. Sor Josefa Clara confessed to feeling many strange sensations, such as being beaten and thrown down the stairs. These were a prelude to confessions of a more intimate nature. She had had “impure” sensations such as being touched by demons, although she added that they never succeeded in having carnal congress with her. Being aware that this confession could put her in trouble, because visions were under heavy inquisitorial scrutiny, she stated she had perceived such evil experiences not with her corporal eyes but in her fantasy. The worst sensations were those of demons “coming close to her face and her mouth,” which she knew belonged to “a male face because of the asperity of the beard.” She struggled to ignore her feelings but, apparently, she could not restrain her sexuality. On one occasion she felt “another body come close to hers, perceiving its heat,” but in this case she said she did not experience in her own body the effect caused by the temptation of spilling the human seed, and she claimed to have been very saddened by the experience. How did this cloistered woman get to know the arousal close to spilling the human seed? Innocence in sexual feelings was not a condition required for taking the veil and even after profession some nuns continued to struggle with their stifled sexuality.⁵⁰ According to her, her confessors had told her that such feelings were torments caused by the enemy, and that she should bear them like a cross, but their advice did not bring her enough inner peace. Possibly in despair, she wrote Fr. Joaquín Pérez del Rey, one of her confessors, a letter written with her own blood. He declared to the Inquisitors that the novice told him that she had drawn the blood from her arm with a pen knife, a penitential act that was carried in imitation of the blood shed by Christ. Altogether, her erotic feelings did not raise a single eyebrow among the Inquisitors, who were well aware of the weaknesses of the flesh. They advised the novice to let herself be guided by a good confessor and ignored the discomfort of the Franciscans friars, who by mid-eighteenth century had spent over one century trying to impose discipline over their own nuns without much success.

The denial of profession to a novice was not unheard of, although we have no data on its frequency. Lack of health or lack of vocation were the most commonly given reasons for those cases surviving in the archives. In 1704, the discalced Carmelites of Puebla had a record of having turned back fifteen novices, some for lack of health, others for lack of mettle and vocation. In fact, one novice who had promised a large endowment was dismissed after her novitiate for lack of character.⁵¹ In 1779, Sor María Rosa, abbess of the Capuchins of San Felipe de Jesús, of Mexico City, asked the archbishop for his permission to release Sor María Christina, a novice with an incurable disease, and whose health was incompatible with the rigor of their observance. A physician certified that she suffered from epilepsy, and had been admitted during a five-year remission of her “accident.”⁵² Another possibility for a discouraged novice was leaving the convent before the community would rebuff her. When a novice left the convent her case was quickly shelved. Failing the novitiate test or simply giving it up was a humiliating and sad experience for the convent, the novice, and her family, and their dismissals were carried out with utter discretion. Sor María de San José, cited before for her mentoring experience, had to deal with at least one case of a novice who claimed to have been expelled from the convent. In Sor María’s view, the novice’s separation from the community was due to her unwillingness to adhere to the strict observance of the discalced Augustine Order. This case raised some resentment in the community and had to be submitted to the viceroy and the Bishop of Puebla for a final approval of her decision.⁵³

In 1764, Sor María Dominga Coleta, teacher of novices in the Indian convent of Corpus Christi in Mexico, wrote a letter to Fr. Diego Osorio to inform him that Sor Diega Martina had a very strong character and did not show aptitude for the religious life. The community had voted against her profession, and in order to save the convent’s “public credit” her departure would be explained as a matter of sickness. This would save everybody’s face. The Franciscan Provincial played his role and made a public statement in which he explained that the novice’s withdrawal was not due to a pending marriage or engagement, or lack of “quality” in her lineage, all dishonorable reasons for leaving. Leaving the convent for marriage meant that her piety was not deep enough to prefer the superiority of religious life. Because Corpus Christi would not admit the profession of mestizas or white girls, lacking quality in the lineage meant that she was found to be a mestiza, or that her family was of low social extraction, and therefore, she could have entered the convent in bad faith.⁵⁴

This convent had the unfortunate experience of having to evict several novices in the 1730s on account of race. Among those who were evicted from Corpus Christi was Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, cited previously for her ascetic practices. She had not committed any moral fault or broken any discipline rule. She was española and among a group of novices that a Franciscan Provincial, Fr. Francisco Navarrete, attempted to admit to profession in Corpus Christi, contravening the wishes of its founder.⁵⁵ Her natural inclination to underestimate herself was worsened by the fact that she did not have enough money to pay for her dowry. When she finally made her way into Corpus Christi, her position there as a white woman imposed upon the Indians by a strong-headed Provincial was very tenuous. The white novices were eventually forced to leave, and Sor Sebastiana recorded the

incident as demeaning and causing concern among her relatives and companions. “When they removed me from the holy convent of Corpus, they feared I would die. I did not wish to reveal what my heart felt; it tore my soul to see myself in the street.”⁵⁶ She professed in San Juan de la Penitencia in 1746, having obtained financial support given to help poor girls to profess.

FINAL PROFESSION

The most eventful day in the life of the novice was that of her mystical marriage to God. This was the apotheosis after a year or more of preparation. Through profession she became the bride of Christ, and she would be allowed to remove the novice’s white veil and wear the black veil in honor of her absent husband. Before the ceremony, however, legal formalities had to be fulfilled and spiritual and material preparations had to be made. Reaching the point of final profession demanded the recommendation of the teacher of novices to the community, which had to proceed to receive another member and fulfill the legal rules demanded by the church. First, the novice had to write a request to the abbess which could read as a model suggested to the novices of San Bernardo: “Very Reverend Mother and My Lady, since the year of my probation is ending, for the love of God I beg to be received in this convent, disregarding my bad life and my bad examples, and because I trust [the efficacy of] the prayers of Your Reverence and this saintly convent, I intend to mend my ways and become other than what I have been.”⁵⁷

For their part, the voting members of the community had to decide in favor or against profession, after having had at least one year to observe the behavior of the novice and judge her character as a potential sister. The voting process could be cast with colored pieces of papers (ballots), and also with beans.⁵⁸ If the vote was favorable, the nuns asked the permission of the bishop or archbishop for the final profession. A typical request read: “The abbess, *definidoras*, *vicaria* and accountants of this house beg from Your Most Reverend Paternity to grant his blessing and license for the solemn profession of our novice, Sor Maria Manuela del Espíritu Santo, who has already finished her year of probation and has been received by vote of this community. We trust we will receive the favor of your Reverence in granting this petition, for which we will remain in perpetual indebtedness.”⁵⁹

The Vicar of Nuns, the person in charge of the general administration of women’s convents, took the next steps, which in many ways replicated those of the first profession. He ordered two ecclesiastics to visit the novice and confirm her free will to profess in a notarized document that ensured she was not forced to take the veil. They verified the novice’s social and racial qualifications as stated in her birth certificate.⁶⁰ Sor María Sebastiana de Jesús Nazareno, Abbess of Corpus Christi, requested such a visit on April 22, 1766, for the profession of Sor María de los Dolores to explore the will of the novice as the Holy Council of Trent orders.⁶¹ She was then seventeen years and seven months old, legitimate daughter, and a virgin (*doncella*). The male authorities interviewed the novice and asked if she understood her charge and obligations, and if she was acting of free will. Ritually she would declare that “she had experienced the burdens and obligations of religion during the year of novitiate, which were greater than those of the world outside,” and being aware of them she had the courage (*ánimo*) to make her solemn profession and to abide by the four vows of poverty, obedience, chastity, and enclosure, as well as obedience to the Rule of the convent. She also declared to have no known impediments to profess, and signed the document. Two lay witnesses attested to her being a virtuous and exemplary girl, and she was examined in her ability to read from a Breviary.⁶²

As they were officially going to “die to the world,” novices had to make a will before profession to dispose of all their personal belongings. This was a legal as well as a spiritual requirement, and it entailed a form of forensic maneuver within inheritance laws. Under Spanish laws daughters inherited equally with sons, but the investment made in a religious profession demanded adjustment in the share of the novice as a member of the family.⁶³ Families of means endowed their daughters as well as they could afford before the profession.⁶⁴ The family also spent considerable amounts of money on her wardrobe, the ceremony of profession, and maybe even the purchase of a cell in nondiscalced convents. The additional “investment” could amount to 3,000 or 4,000 pesos beyond the dowry. Wealthy families could spend that much, not to mention the fact that some families boasted more than one nun. Professing was not a money-saving device for any family. Since only very rich families could afford marriage dowries of many thousands of pesos, a nun’s dowry should be considered as important as a secular bride’s dowry, and completing it could involve considerable effort for poor girls. Pious donors and some confraternities had, as part of their charitable objectives, the endowment of girls for either marriage or profession. Many an aspirant had to wait for years until several patrons would complete the required dowry. Sor Antonia de San Jacinto, of Santa Clara in Querétaro, accumulated her dowry and the expenses of her profession by requesting monetary contributions from several patrons.⁶⁵

With thousands of wills in the archives, and no studies to establish patterns in fashion and time, we can only point to some of their key features. The dowry was most often paid in cash, although exceptionally, convents accepted liens on properties in the early colonial period. Families had to discharge cash for the dowry but they would also mortgage their properties to ensure an income for the nun after profession, to purchase a cell, and even buy a slave for her service. Funds earmarked as income for the nun in addition to her dowry were known as *reservas*, a source of income that only the wealthiest of nuns could afford. Reading nuns’ wills is like reading a map of the social and economic geography of her family as well of their own thoughts about the distribution of their money. Families had to balance the assets allocated to each sibling according to their own assessment of the worth of their futures as well as the reach of their means, while respecting the legal stipulations of the laws of inheritance. To marry a daughter well could mean the disbursement of a large dowry; while a male sibling in charge of an estate or a business could legally receive an extra amount of money allowed by the law. The allocation of money to the profession of a nun was pitted against that of her siblings. The professing novice often, but not always, renounced her share in the family inheritance, although it was understood that her dowry and the allocation of money and resources for her future life represented that share. The social standing of the family was judged by the public expression of the religious ceremony and the implicit assumption that she had been well covered for life. Indeed, many nuns carried dowries larger than any laywoman could ever dream of. When Sor María del Sacramento professed in San Bernardo in 1764, her will tells us that she disposed of 12,000 pesos to be either lent at interest or mortgaged on properties to yield a 5 percent interest for her own expenses. That sum of money was her legitimate share of her family’s expected inheritance, which she had not renounced. Her father mortgaged a large rural property and a house for nine years to provide for her.

Having received a share of their inheritance from their families or patrons, nuns became patrons of pious deeds themselves, making the display of charity a mirror of their desire to ensure the destiny of their souls as well as to provide benefits for another woman protégée, younger girls of lesser means, poorer relatives, or other novices waiting for their profession. These were not choices made by sick or dying women. The novices were mostly in the flower of their youth, and looked forward to living a long life. So, unlike the wills of a dying person, these documents resembled more a bonded investment with significance in the present and the future. As such, besides ensuring a comfortable life, they created a network of charity. They also showed the wish to further the interests of their own convents by appointing them as heirs to some of their material goods and money and endowing some saints’ feasts. Personal and spiritual security, benefits to other women, and institutional charity rank in that order in their wills.

In 1759, Sor María Micaela de la Santísima Trinidad, a Capuchin from San José de Gracia in Querétaro, left 2,000 pesos mortgaged on property to sustain a chantry, which meant that a religious would say masses for her soul. She left 500 pesos for the dowry of Sor Juana Rosalía, of the convent of

Regina Celi, in Mexico, and thirty pesos to a girl interned in the convent of Jesús María, for her profession if she so desired. If the girl failed to profess the money should be given to two nuns of the same convent. She also left 200 pesos for the cause of canonization of Felipe de Neri, and ordered that any money left after these allocations should be given to the convent to help pay for the celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi.⁶⁶ Doña Ignacia Palacio y Borbón, one of the wealthiest widows in Guadalajara, professed in the Augustinian convent of Santa Mónica in 1736. Childless, she lavished a significant amount of her money on the convent. At the time of her profession she had already spent 19,000 pesos on improvements in the building and donated a silver lamp valued at 3,000 pesos, promising to do some more with money that was owed to her. In addition, she left money for her niece and a house to the convent of La Merced. Since she owned two slaves, she ceded the service of one of them to another professed nun in the convent of Santa María la Gracia. While not all nuns could offer so much money to a given convent, as a whole, they were some of the best patrons of their institutions.⁶⁷ Naming the convent as an heir could lead to legal battles if the allocation of money was contested by another heir, or it involved real estate embroiled in litigation.⁶⁸ But, on the other hand, if no legal problems occurred, the profession of wealthy nuns could be long-term investments for their institutions.

All novices were entitled to one day of “freedom” before taking the veil. They could leave the cloisters as the final test of their determination. This opportunity was interpreted not so much as a final review of the things that they had missed, but as a farewell to everything they had renounced. Whether they took the opportunity to visit their families and have a round of the streets in the company of friends was left to their own personal decision. Some did not leave the cloisters at all and spent the “freedom” period within it. Some convents, such as Santa Inés in Mexico City did not allow the day of freedom to be spent outside the convent. During the episcopacy of Archbishop Francisco Aguiar y Seijas (1682–98), a rather intolerant man, novices seemed to have been obliged to renounce the opportunity of making any visits outside the convent. The archbishop threatened punishment for the conventual officers if they allowed this transgression.⁶⁹ In 1755 Franciscan Provincial Juan José Moreyra also attempted to restrict the “liberty” of that last day in the world. He claimed that the novices left the cloister before dawn and did not return until the late hours of the night, having spent the day all over the city, giving an unbecoming example to the world. To stop such “abuses” he decreed that the novice should leave the convent at an appropriate hour, and only to visit the home of the vicar (also known a *Juez Provisor*) to express her freedom to profess. After that she should return to her convent.⁷⁰ It is unlikely that his orders were obeyed for too long, as we have subsequent records of Franciscan nuns doing exactly what he had forbidden.

The bride of Christ brought with her a personal trousseau (*ajuar*) as a proper bride should, as well as furniture to furnish her cell. The list of items required for the profession of a nun in Santa Catarina de Sena for her first profession had an estimated initial cost of 378 pesos for items such as 48 yards of “Ypre,” a woolen fabric for the habit, and 76 yards of other fabrics for other clothing items, which would be sewn at home or in the convent. Sheets, a mattress, pillows, bedcovers, and furniture for her cell were added in another document. In addition, her family had to pay for the clergymen who officiated in the ceremony, the acolyte, the wax for the candles, and all the paraphernalia required by the ceremony. The minimum cost of the final ceremony was estimated at 120 pesos, and that was in basic costs. She also had to pay legal fees for the paper work, buy breviaries for prayers, a book of the conventual Rules, a book of the history of the saints of her order, the books for the hours of the divine office, and the ring that all the brides of Christ had to wear. This second estimate for all these items did not include the cost of yet another order of fabric for a new habit. Although the costs of music and fireworks were not estimated, they were expected to be “according to the means of the family of the professant.”⁷¹ The estimated costs for the profession of one candidate in San Lorenzo (Mexico) in 1667 were 630 pesos.⁷² In religious life spirituality and worldliness always went hand in hand.

The solemnity and meaning of the final profession was overwhelming.⁷³ After it the novice became a full-fledged nun. She would never leave the cloisters under any circumstance. She would be buried in the convent’s church with her new family: her sisters in religion. Her own family ebbed into a world that she would never visit again, and while family members could visit her in the parlor, the Rules of all Orders discouraged the continuation of affective ties with parents or siblings. The ceremony of profession was open to family and a throng of curious people who seemed to look forward to these events. People would crowd the church to witness the irrevocable offering of another bride to God.

A few ceremonial guidelines have survived, allowing us to reenact the ritual. In the convent of San Jerónimo, where Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz professed, an imprint lacking any date recorded the ritual.⁷⁴ The habit was folded in a basin and was placed on a table in front of the altar. The novice knelt in front of the altar holding candles in her hands. The priest conducting the service blessed the habit and then questioned the novice if she professed of her own free will, if she had any debts, if she was married or had made any promise to marry. After she answered to his questions, the professant kissed his hand and rose, walking to the entrance of the convent adjacent to the church. While she did that the nuns sang a responsory, *Veni Sponsa Christo* (Come Bride of Christ), and a psalm if she was a virgin. If she was not, the responsory (as in the case of professing widows) it was *Veni Electa Mea* (Come my Elected). Once in the inner sanctum the novice dressed up in her habit and the community gathered to pray before the altar of the coro, the room where the nuns gathered to pray. Once prayers were over, the novice rose to embrace her abbess and the rest of her sisters in religion, in a gesture of Christian agape. Then the veil was blessed and a mass followed, during which she was questioned again about her will to profess. After this, the priest solemnly read the four vows of her profession: to keep her chastity, her enclosure, her obedience, and her poverty. For keeping the vows the priest promised eternal life. Her final profession was administered by the abbess. After another round of prayers she put on the black veil and put on a ring and a crown, while the conventual choir intoned antiphons. The act finished with the priest turning her over for the final time to the abbess and the community. The Brigidines of Santa Brígida made the novice lie on the ground facing down while the bell pealed for the dead. In the Capuchins the novice wore a white veil and a crown of roses. This was replaced by the black veil and a crown of thorns. In a bridal basket she received, among the flowers were the instruments she should use for taking her “disciplines.”⁷⁵

Sor María Marcela has left an account of her final profession in the Capuchins of Querétaro, which embraces the totality of the moment, from legal concerns to the emotions of her siblings, and reveals her own feelings throughout the ceremony.

On the vespers [of the profession] I made my testament, renouncing everything from my paternal inheritance, because even though I had not spent much from the total of his possessions, I wished that my share should remain in it to cover my expenses. I begged my brothers’ forgiveness for the bad example I had given to them and with such fervor that my father, crying all the time, begged me to stop talking, lest I’d kill him. On the arrival of the happy day all fears disappeared, the tears ceased, and the soul brimmed with a serious joy. Immersed in my interior, I entered humbly in the choir and I felt as if the sun penetrated me; my understanding cleared, my will was inflamed, and I saw, with the eyes of the soul the divinity of our Lord, to my right, as a most handsome young man, resplendent and dressed in green with fine gold trimmings, full of happiness, who remained next to me all the time until the end of the public act. I was almost beyond my senses, but attentive to what I was doing to profess with the right

intent. I made my vows with great will and so clear and strong that all present heard them, and they stated they had seen me resplendent . . . As the ceremony finished I saw the Lord no longer, but I felt Him in my soul, calling it and taking possession of it, drawing out of it so many effects, and affections so high that I cannot explain them, and I will only say that the joy I felt was so great and that it grew so much day by day, that I could not hide it and I told every person with whom I talked: “my relish grows; I am happier every day; I live in heavens.”⁷⁶

The meaning of the vision of Christ sitting next to her during the ceremony of mystical marriage that made her his bride is clear. He could not be absent from such a key moment, and this vision assured her that she was truly his. Her family tried to have a portrait of her at profession without much success because she did not want it to be done. After two attempts, the painters managed to paint her head, but the portraits were never finished. Eventually the canvas was used to paint saints’ lives. It was customary for the most affluent families to commission a portrait of their daughters dressed up for the final profession. In the eighteenth century the fashion was to wear a high headdress in the shape of a crown of wax flowers. The nuns also carried a bouquet of wax flowers and either a candle, a crucifix, or a figure of Jesus as a baby. Among the Conceptionist nuns breastplates or badges were worn for this occasion. Known as *escudos*, they had religious scenes finely embroidered or painted and became miniature works of art. A nun in this regalia was as richly dressed as the most exalted bride in an eloquent display of pomp. These portraits became known as “crowned nuns,” and were in fashion until the early years of the republican period.⁷⁷ The portraits of “crowned nuns” became a symbol of status and helped to create an emblematic model of the nun as a privileged woman. The significance of the wealth and worldly ornaments in which she was dressed was complex. While the religious symbols were appropriate for the occasion, they could also speak to the vanity of the world that she was abandoning. Seventeenth-century portraits show nuns in the more conventional habit they would wear for life and, at the most, holding a simple symbol of their state, such as a lily for purity.

In contrast, what the world saw in most professions was the display of wealth, and the pageant. In 1752, Sor Ana María de Jesús, daughter of Diego García Bravo, a wealthy merchant of Mexico City, professed in Jesús María. Archbishop Manuel Rubio Salinas presided over the ceremony. The chronicle of José Manuel de Castro Santa-Anna noted that the cream of society was present, including titled nobility. The music “was of the utmost delicacy,” being performed by the best masters in the art. He added that her father being among the richest merchants of the city explained the attendance of such exclusive guests.⁷⁸

SPIRITUAL MEANINGS

There was more depth to a religious profession than the pageantry of music and light witnessed by socialites. The sermon of profession was part of the ceremonial ritual, a crowning commentary on the spiritual character of the nun and the meaning of her profession to the audience attending it. To be sure, the preacher’s sermon was a sign of affluence that parents of well-to-do professing nuns could and would pay for and even have printed afterwards. Sermons added solemnity to the occasion and were a means to measure the family’s status.⁷⁹ They also reflect the canons of spirituality of the period. Churches were crowded during a profession and the sermons were the perfect venue to reinforce the image of the nuns in the people’s imagination. Popular culture was oral, and from the pulpit the preacher molded opinions and reinforced concepts about the meaning of women’s monastic life, creating a consensus about its exceptionality and desirability. Felipe Montalvo, preaching in 1748, stated, “the objective of oratory is to teach and persuade the audience to receive well the doctrine that is being proposed and taught to them.”⁸⁰ As an example, let us examine a 1686 sermon by Franciscan Fr. Juan de Avila, on the occasion of the profession of Sor Mariana de San Francisco in the convent of Santa Clara in Mexico.⁸¹ The profession took place on December 8, a special day in the Catholic calendar because it marked the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. The growing reverence for the notion of the Immaculate Conception had gained great impetus since the late fifteenth century, and by the seventeenth century it had become a rage. Although it was not dogma, it was on its way to becoming one of the most sacred beliefs of that period.⁸² Thus the preacher, in a ritual gesture of devotion, added a fifth vow to the customary four: that of defending the concept of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

In its printed version, the sermon was preceded by a dedicatory page from Sor Mariana’s father, Francisco de Murga, who described the profession as “an occasion for happiness” for him, and a sign of the favor of his favorite saint, Saint Joseph, whose blessings he was sure accounted for the profession of his daughter. Sor Mariana was the first in her family to take the veil, and he was obviously proud of it. Profession sermons usually explained the meaning of the vows that would be taken and this was no exception. Fr. Juan explained to the novice and to the audience where she stood in the midst of her new family, “Your husband is Christ and you are the Bride. Your godmother (*madrina*) is the Holiest Mary; the house of your wedding is this convent of Santa Clara; your bridal bed is the sacrament that makes God and the soul one.” He told her how Christ addressed her, assuming to speak for him as he pledged the bride his eternal love: “On my life, I swear that with all my possessions, and always as your husband, I will serve you with protection so that with joy, your spirit may say that this Bride has also been her Husband’s soul repair and served Him well as a virtuous gift.”⁸³ As didactic tools, sermons carried a personal and social message. It is not difficult to see a social message for secular marriages in Fr. Juan’s opus. Christ symbolized the role of all good husbands in protecting their wives. In return the bride would serve her husband and become a source of solace for him. Fr. Juan also stressed the transition to a new home and a new family, and the convent as a place of shelter and prayer where the novice would join other brides equally dedicated to the highest choice any woman could make. The tranquility and security of the safe port of religion protected the novice from the storms of life and ensured her the means to obtain the most important goal of life: the eternal salvation of her soul.

The sermon extolled virginity, especially since Sor Mariana professed on December 8. To convey the meaning of virginity in words, Fr. Juan evoked “ancient paintings,” a visual strategy frequent in sermons. Virginity was “a winged maiden dressed up in steel, with a sharp knife in her right hand and a lock of hair in her left hand. Her eyes were closed and her mouth open. Out of her mouth came five threads of breath, five beautiful bright stars ascending to the sky which bore an inscription: “*Spiritus eius repleabit Cac-los*” (Spirits like yours replenish heaven). She held the knife of valor and her resolution to defend the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The maiden in the painting, he recalled, cut her hair as superfluous so that “not even a hair of lasciviousness would remain in her chastity.” Ironically, this idealized version of a virgin’s purity was not necessarily congruent with the dangers that the church itself acknowledged existed, even within the cloisters and, as will be seen later, had to be fought with strong determination. However, in a society in which consensual unions and births outside of wedlock were frequent, the exaltation of virginity as a part of a paradigm of personal and spiritual perfection carried a forceful message. Marriage as a ceremony to be respected and eulogized also had social repercussions for all those who shunned its bond or indulged in extramarital affairs. Fr. Juan also conveyed the image of the nun as a determined virgin, strong, defiant, and self-assured, recalling more the image of a fighter than a meek Lamb of God. Determination would be invaluable in the pursuit of religious life and it was the result of the tests she had overcome in the novitiate.

The wedding theme was underlined by José Antonio Plancarte, preaching in 1799, over one century later. He traced his source of inspiration to the Song of Songs and compared the brides to pearls sheltered in the shell of the convent. The bride's concealment and preservation of her purity made her beautiful in the eyes of Christ. The love of Christ, the fidelity she owed to him, her total consecration to the groom reinforced the special relationship of groom and bride grounded in the eternal vow between the two of them. Her election to become the bride of Christ made her different from other women, but she should remember, as Juan Bautista Taboada stated in another sermon, that the Christ elected her, and not vice versa. Jesus was for everyone, but not everyone was for Jesus. Placing the initiative on Christ, the privilege of the election was enhanced, reinforcing the understanding that men elected their brides. It was the masculine prerogative to choose while the feminine was to feel the joy of being chosen.⁸⁴ Profession was a gift from heaven and with it, the novice, now turned into bride, received all the tools she would need to endure the heaviest of all tasks, her clausturation. With her renunciation to the world she gained the true liberty of finding the spirit of God.⁸⁵

A retrospective look at the novitiate shows this to be a key period on the life of the future nun that molded her character and taught her the foundations of the discipline she was expected to observe throughout her life. As in all aspects of conventual life, there were human passions involved in the process that betrayed the prescriptive norms of the institution. Nevertheless, the pedagogy of the novitiate is an important component in our understanding of the education of a religious person, an essential element for the understanding of religious life itself. For those teaching it, there was an aesthetic pursuit in the elaboration of ideals of love, submission, dedication, and sacrifice. But they also developed a pragmatic axis of discipline that although following the regulations of the Order, was affected by the values of a period which regarded rigor as desirable in training the candidates. Learning how to follow the vows in body and spirit was crucial to being a religious, and was what made them different from those outside the cloister; thus the emphasis on learning how to pray without overindulging in prayer, or learning how to stand the humiliation of harsh words and rough treatment that would make the novice become a proper nun. The personal recollections of the novitiate by a few testimonies are the welcomed nonmediated counterbalance to the construction of sermons and pedagogical tools. Even though the many years of religious life colored the memory of those humble beginnings, this information about discipline, intrigue, and emotion-laden visionary experiences brings us closer to those who entered a life that seems, at times, so distant from today. They tell us how the novice faced personal shortcomings and inflated expectations of joyous spirituality. She learned that she would be constantly presented with choices that either attached her to the world or elevated her to the comforts of her religion. In the following chapters we will examine in greater depth the spiritual meaning of the religious vows and the world of piety and devotions current in Mexico in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as the complexities of daily life, since nuns were human beings, not angels, and as such, very much involved in the world despite having chosen to separate themselves from it. Spirituality and worldly reality were intertwined and a constant presence in the nun's life.

CHAPTER THREE

The Spiritual Meanings of Religious Life

“The truth is that to suffer for God is the real path to perfection and the safest way that God has opened for all souls, as it is stamped by the footsteps of Jesus Christ, who so much suffered for our love.... And truly God brought Mother Anna María to religion, so that as the Bride of Jesus crucified, she would live always crucified and by this means could achieve the perfection she desired. The proof that a soul truly loves God is not to enjoy celestial sweetness but to suffer for his love.”



Taking the veil in the enclosure of an early modern convent implied a lifelong commitment of faith to reach the ultimate goal of saving one's soul. The teleological meaning of profession was well understood by post-Tridentine Catholic women. They were taught that dedicating one's life to prayer, accepting the discipline of conventual life, and exercising the virtues that would earn God's grace were expected to be more easily achievable within the well-defined perimeter of the cloister. The convent was described as providing a safe refuge from the temptations of the world, the framework of a life regulated by church-approved monastic rules, the consolation of spiritual access to the sacraments of the church, and the guidance of seasoned confessors. The company of other women who had elected the same goals and shared similar struggles in achieving them was expected to be comforting, besides providing a spirit of collegiality little known to women in any other walk of life. Within the cloisters nuns encountered a broad sample of spiritual guidelines, developed in the form of sermons, readings, pastoral letters, and treatises written by moral theologians. Prayer books and inspirational community talks known as *pláticas espirituales* were part of a larger package of devotional practices that also included the expected communal prayers of the canonical hours. These many forms of addressing their spiritual needs formed a seamless fabric of religious practices that nurtured their faith and encouraged their piety. The intensity of religious feelings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is perhaps difficult to understand in the contemporary and more secular world of today, but we must accept the fact that faith ran deeply and piety was its expected expression. In the convent the nun's most important occupation was to cultivate her spiritual life in order to achieve a high degree of perfection that would earn her the grace of salvation.

The vows the novices repeated on their last profession were the most important commitment in terms of defining the personal obligations they incurred as a result of their choice. Nuns remained morally obliged to follow them and were answerable for their execution or neglect. The vows sealed their lives and were irrevocable. As the base of the conventual internal discipline, they were more than the venue for personal self-control; they ensured the professed the favors and blessing of God, Christ, and Mary.¹ If religious life was a “safe port,” in the words of contemporaneous clergymen, the vows were the anchors that held the nun in the tranquil waters of that port. The four vows under which most Mexican nuns lived received their final shape at the Council of Trent, but they had a much longer history, having been refined by several Orders and the diocesan church throughout the Middle Ages. They were: poverty, chastity, obedience, and enclosure. Understanding the meaning of these vows was essential to religious observance.

POVERTY

Poverty meant the renunciation of independent use of property, except with permission of the prelate or superior. It was made in remembrance of the poverty of Jesus and appeared rather formidable in its enunciation: to relinquish all power of dominion over objects and to transfer them to the church and its prelates, upon whose decision rested the professant's right to use anything of value.² Guadalajara Bishop Diego Rodríguez de Rivas explained to the nuns that they were the noblest and richest of women. In the cloisters they had whatever they needed, which was much less than they required outside.³ Archbishop Juan de Ortega y Montañés, revising the Rules of two religious Orders in Mexico City, stated that nuns could not “own anything, or call anything theirs, for they cannot own or possess in their names any type of property, real estate, rents or income in any manner.”⁴ Such sweeping statements had little resemblance to what was actual practice, as approved by the church itself. By the middle of the seventeenth century, even rigorous moralists such as Antonio Núñez S. J. acknowledged that poverty did not preclude possession of some objects. Before profession the nun was not bound to poverty, and this legally entitled her to dispose of her property as she wished. Some of it could be separated by her family to provide her with an income or ecclesiastic benefice, known as *reserva*. After profession nuns were even entitled to own slaves.⁵ However, Núñez lamented the lack of decorum shown by many nuns who were fond of jewels, rings, ribbons, and fine cloth for their habits.⁶ Powerless to change that, Núñez advised nuns to follow the prescribed behavior of asking permission from their superiors to use their income and property, and exercise restraint in their spending to avoid superfluous expenses. Yet, since the Rules of convents and the needs of nuns differed, he acknowledged that licenses granted by abbesses and prelates to accommodate many personal needs created different usages in each Order and each convent. Convents following discalced orders enforced poverty more strictly than nondiscalced ones, where the comforts of life began to become commonplace in the late seventeenth century. The personal income some nuns enjoyed allowed them the small pleasures of ownership of devotional icons and material goods in their rooms, as well as the ability to bequeath objects to the conventual church or endow masses and religious feasts. Nuns “owned” their own cells for one or several lives and all the furniture in them. Further, the convent as an institution owned real estate property and liens on properties to ensure its income. It also lent money, a practice that began in the late seventeenth century. As the ultimate beneficiaries of the nuns' properties and income, convents could inherit from them as well as lay patrons.⁷ Thus, strict rules of poverty were unenforceable. This was a well-known and practiced reality in New Spain, notwithstanding the mandates of the Rules of the various Orders or the rhetoric of spiritual books that continued to stress a strict line of renunciation and an idealized

representation of poverty in an effort to maintain respect for the virtual integrity of the vow.

CHASTITY

Purity in body and mind was the meaning of the vow of chastity. It was defined as the renunciation of all carnal pleasure, especially those licit to marriage. Attempts against the chastity of a bride of Christ were regarded as a sacrilege. In the mystical marriage with Christ, a nun gave herself in body and soul to the Lord, and by keeping her chastity she kept the honor of her husband.⁸ Nothing was more fragile or more sacred in religious life than the chastity of the bride of Christ.⁹ Jesus was sometimes referred to as a “jealous” husband who could not tolerate sharing his love with any other human creature, and his love was anchored on the virginity of the bride. His favorites were the innocent, chaste, and pristine souls that dedicated their lives to him alone. Thus, the brides of Christ had to be the purest venues for that love, explained Antonio Núñez, and to share that love with any human stained the venues.¹⁰

Since the fourth century, virginity had begun to acquire a charisma only enhanced by time. Throughout the Middle Ages the concept that the highest perfection of Christian life could only be achieved by the virgin woman was paramount. Virginity was elevated to a state comparable to angelic perfection, far superior to the state of marriage, with Mary’s virginity seen as model for the future brides of Christ.¹¹ Some medieval historians consider that by displacing female sexuality, virginity liberated female talents such as the capacity to express herself through mysticism and gain the personal and social power derived from its charisma.¹² By the seventeenth century the eulogy of chastity and virginity were common themes in sermons, as well as an obligatory part of all monastic Rules.¹³ Inspired by the teachings of Saint Ambrose, Fr. Nicolás Quiñones explained to the Indian nuns of Corpus Christi, the latecomers to conventual life, that chastity makes men closer to angels. Virginal purity made women very agreeable to Jesus. “You are obliged to live pure and chaste . . . in thought, words and deeds. Any thought, word and deed against chastity is a mortal sin.”¹⁴ Dishonest thoughts suggested delectation and consent. To prevent impure thoughts nuns should constantly guard all their senses because one could sin through all of them. The eyes could lead a nun’s resolve astray and were the main gateway to distraction and engagement with someone who was not her groom. Bishop Palafox recalled the Rules of Saint Augustine that recommended modesty in the eyes; unchaste eyes betrayed an unchaste heart. It was “illicit” to look at men, and criminal and forbidden to desire them or be desired by them.¹⁵ Fr. Diego Díaz warned a professed to have “veils in her eyelids” to keep them honest and modest.¹⁶ The veil that covered a nun’s head should cover her face from men alien to her world. Conventual openings such as the grilles and parlors where prelates and family could visit had to be draped to protect the nuns; the *coros* or places where the community prayed were separated from the nave of the church by a tightly woven grill and a heavy curtain that was not supposed to be drawn except for services and prayer times so that the professed could face the altar.¹⁷ But curtains and rules were not the only means to preserve purity. Other activities recommended by prelates and practiced by “exemplary” nuns aimed at controlling all the senses and mastering the body in its totality. Temperance in eating and fasting would control the sense of taste and smell. It was thought that consumption of some foods and drinks (such as heavily spiced dishes and chocolate) could stir the body in improper ways. Closing the ears to words that could suggest impure thoughts protected the sense of hearing; the use of *cilicios* (tools for mortifying the flesh) and corporal discipline tempered the sense of touch and any excitement deriving from it. Self-vigilance to correct any desire of the body to triumph over the spirit was one of the driving forces in nuns’ lives.¹⁸

Few stories were dearer to biographers than those of young girls taking early vows of chastity as a premonition of their destiny as nuns, or the defense of their virtue against the sordid desires of men.¹⁹ María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio made a vow of virginity when she was around eight years old, and so did Sor María Josefa Lino de la Santísima Trinidad and Sor María Inés de los Dolores, among many others.²⁰ Hagiography abounded with stories of nuns who had preserved the chastity of their minds after many years of profession or had conquered impure desires and lewd temptations originating in the devil and embodied in a man. Sor María Antonia del Espíritu Santo Maldonado, who professed in Santa Clara, Querétaro, in the mid-eighteenth century, had grown up in a devout family and begun her devotions to the Virgin Mary as a child. Her biographer and father confessor Miguel Ramón Pinilla wrote that God had given her the “privilege of virginity” and she had never known anything to the contrary. She never learned “what turpitude was, and enjoyed such a singular gift without fears or apprehensions, as an angel incapable of obscene or dirty vices.” “She never suffered an impure movement and the Lord did not give the Enemy [Satan] the opportunity to teach her any vice contrary to chastity, neither asleep nor awake.”²¹ He transferred the meaning of physical virginity to mental chastity, but his intention was to assert that some women were so innocent that they were ignorant of anything concerning carnal desires. Few other biographers would make such statements. It was perhaps more appealing (and more realistic) to present the nun as conquering temptations than as ignorant of their existence. Pueblan Carmelite Isabel de la Encarnación fought her parents’ desire to marry her off but was beleaguered by strong sexual temptations duly recorded by her biographer Pedro Salmerón. He had confidential information culled from her letters to him that he quoted throughout his text. He depicted some of her suitors before she took the veil as “lascivious men” who would solicit her for torpid purposes. In the same vein, when she was already a professed nun, he claimed that the devil appeared to her in the form of a naked man or as a handsome young man who would court her.²² It was not improper to disclose the brushes with sexual temptations of the brides of Christ, as long as they defended themselves. It was all part of the many trials of religious life.

OBEDIENCE

The vow of obedience meant the renunciation of personal will and the unconditional submission to the commands of one’s prelates and the abbess of the convent. Obedience, according to the Jesuit Antonio Núñez, was understood as a process of will, execution, and understanding. The desire or will to execute an order and carrying it out were linked together and were the foundation of the vow. Understanding the sacrifice of surrendering her own will and abstaining from passing judgment on any commands received was the apex of the vow of obedience.²³ In other words, the essence of obedience lay in willingly renouncing analyzing, let alone contesting, any order issued by a superior. Reminders of the meaning of the vow were frequent in sermons of profession, the right time to warn the newly minted nun about her future. Preaching in a profession, José María Gómez y Villaseñor indulged in complex verbal tangles as he praised obedience:

In contemplating a soul without volition, I cannot but admire her renunciation of all understanding.... She does not think, she does not doubt; she does not inquire the reasons behind what she is commanded.... In the words of Saint Bernard, these strange but wise policies of Heaven, commit her to forego any understanding, but only to judge what is ordered as being good and appropriate; not to reason, except to not examine; not to think, except to not ask, and having as her discretion and prudence, a complete lack of both.... The lights of understanding should serve as shadows to obscure her judgment. This is what it means to abandon everything for God: reason, will, desire and judgment.²⁴

The tenets of blind and holy obedience implied excommunication for disobedience as it suited a mortal sin. The religious hierarchy and internal working order of all religious communities depended on the respect owed to the vow of obedience. The example of Mary's obedience to the will of God was a model for all nuns, understood not as meek submission but as an act of the will, and as such one that meant agency and not passivity.²⁵ Mary obeyed God and offered herself as his slave when she accepted to conceive Christ, Fr. Pedro de Borges reminded his audience in a sermon, while Archbishop Joseph Lanciego y Eguilaz recalled the example of Christ's obedience to his father's order to die on the cross.²⁶ Such were the models to be followed by women in religion. Patience and humility were virtues helping to accept obedience as part of daily life and were inextricably tied to it.

Obedience had some boundaries to preserve one's own spiritual integrity. If an abbess or a superior, even a confessor, ordered any of their subjects to do anything contradictory to the Rule, or endangering her health, life, or the salvation of her soul, she could disobey. Making a decision to disobey a superior was very personal and risky, however, and a nun had to be very self-assured to sustain and defend herself against predictable remonstrations and potential punishment. Examples of open challenge or rebellious "disobedience" to superiors were not a daily affair but, as detailed in Chapters 4 and 9, they could create situations of extreme tension. Rather than resorting to open confrontation, communities and individual nuns worked around potential trouble with their superiors, including their abbess, to maintain respect to the vows while asserting their own will and judgment.

ENCLOSURE

Enclosure meant renouncing life outside the convent and the commitment to living the rest of their lives within its walls, as well as being buried in it after death. This strict concept had not been universal to early Christian life, and only a constant and extensive effort from ecclesiastical authorities after the thirteenth century achieved its acceptance. By the sixth century A.D. most Iberian dedicated virgins were living in convents, the result of efforts by the church prelates to curb their independence from established religion. According to Joyce Salisbury, in the collective mind virginity was a blessed magic state and convents themselves became a social symbol of sacrificial virginity by enclosing it.²⁷ Clausturation to ensure virginity would become a concept pursued by Christian prelates for several centuries. Elizabeth Makowski's study of women's clausturation traces the concept to Augustinian advice, but firmly anchors the practice on Boniface VIII's decree *Periculoso* issued in 1298.²⁸ *Periculoso* did not yield uniform effects in all female religious houses throughout Europe, despite being associated with the preservation of nuns' virginity in safe havens.²⁹ But it was precisely the assumption that nuns had a special obligation to preserve their chastity that achieved the final confirmation of perpetual enclosure at the Council of Trent (1545–63). By that time, church pressure had already obtained acceptance of enclosure by all religious Orders founded between 1300 and 1500, and Trent simply made it canon.³⁰ Enclosure was to become a formal vow, carrying the threat of excommunication and eternal damnation for its transgression, and if need be, entitling the prelates to call for the help of the secular arm for its enforcement.

Most convents in New Spain were founded after the end of the Council of Trent, and enclosure was never an issue, as they all followed the Rules of European Orders. Invoking the original Rules of Santa Coleta approved by Fr. Guillermo del Cassal, dating back to 1434, Fr. Joseph de Castro reissued the Clares Rules in Mexico in 1756 for the Indian convent of Corpus Christi. The concept of enclosure as "prison and grave" put a stern note in his text, written nearly two hundred years after Trent, and reiterated the dark theological spirit of a rule that deprived religious women of the freedom of movement.³¹ Bidding good-bye to the world was equated with a willful death, although only to be reborn into a new life. Thus, José Antonio Plancarte, preaching on the profession of Sor María Antonia Ildefonsa, hailed: "Sor María Antonia is dead—joyful death!"³² Other prelates dwelled on the inspirational goals of clausturation. Bishop Diego Rodríguez de Rivas, quoting Boniface VIII, argued that enclosure freed the body from the contaminations of the world and helped preserve the purity of the soul. While physical enclosure was achieved by closing the conventual doors, spiritual enclosure meant to close off all corporal senses to the world. The cloister, he reminded them, was a voluntary refuge (a reference to their free will in choosing it) that permitted nuns to assume self-control over their spiritual lives. Free from worldly worries, they could devote themselves entirely to God.³³ On profession and feast days, preachers extolled the abandonment of the world (called *el siglo*) never to be seen again, to enjoy a peace free of the treacherous temptations and frail vanities of human life. Clausturation and purity were complementary, and self-control was the yeast to activate these elements.³⁴ In an episcopal letter to the nuns of his diocese, Bishop Palafox of Puebla stressed the importance of the will in maintaining a true spiritual enclosure by warning them that if their hearts and their thoughts remained outside the walls they had chosen as the eternal tomb, they were not really serving God.³⁵ The meaning of enclosure was clear to some highly spiritual nuns such as Sor María Marcela, a Capuchin in Querétaro. In her diary she wrote: "Of enclosure there is little to be said. It is not a corral, but a vast paradise, a field where the soul and the heart expand and enjoy themselves with such joy that the soul feels like a stone fixed in its own center."³⁶ Enclosure may have felt oppressive for some nuns, but it could also help others to find a focus in their spiritual lives.

The physical aspect of enclosure was minutely regulated, proscribing the many activities that throughout time had challenged it. No religious could leave her convent without permission from her bishop, and this was *only* granted for the foundation of another convent or when the community moved to a different location. Fire or extreme danger could prompt temporary abandonment of the building. Otherwise, as prelates saw it, daily life offered too many opportunities to commit "violations" of perfect enclosure. The main conventual door had to be permanently closed except for the admission of a professant and official ecclesiastical visits by the prelates. Men, being the main target of exclusion, could only come in as laborers, either for the construction or repair of the building; as skilled artisans; or as professionals rendering services, such as bleeders and physicians. A list of those who could be admitted for rendering medical services was drawn up and available in all dioceses. Apart from the prelates, confessors were expected to exercise their duties in the confessionals—special spaces devoted to that task. Only the call for confession or extreme unction to sick nuns called for their admission to the convent's inner sanctum, and some rules specified that nuns had to cover their faces in such instances.³⁷ The Laws of the Indies forbade access to women's convents to the members of the Audiencia, but the viceroy and especially the vicereine, as representatives of the king and queen, had access to the enclosure. When the vicereines apparently abused their privilege, the Crown was forced to issue a royal cédula restricting the number of times they could enter nunneries.³⁸

The lay women living in the convents had to ask for permission to leave and reenter it. The freedom of these women, who had made no enclosure vows, became a growing concern for seventeenth-century prelates, who tried to restrict their comings and goings without much success. Neither were the efforts to curtail visits of family and friends to the parlor (*locutorio*) of the convent. The enforcement of enclosure was far from impeccable in the eyes of the male prelates. Several centuries of practice tested its original intentions, showing cracks in its daily routine that, while not challenging it frontally, posed problems to its full observance. Among the goals of reforming the observance of Mexican nunneries in the 1770s was the restriction of access to the parlors to reduce contacts between the world and the cloister. During the enforcement of that process, Bishop of Puebla Francisco Fabián y Fuero reiterated the meaning of enclosure in the pristine terms of the Fathers of the Church. The convent should be "not only a garden full of virtues, but a

closed garden; not only a perennial source of good deeds, but a source that is always closed and sealed.”³⁹ However, such perfection was unattainable. By the end of the eighteenth century, Archbishop Antonio Núñez de Haro acknowledged that strict enclosure, as desired by most prelates, was difficult to maintain.⁴⁰ Despite their walls, convents were “porous” institutions with many contacts with the world outside. All he could do was to admonish his subjects about their many faults and remind them that their lives should reflect their desire to achieve perfection.

Life as a religious began with the hope of fulfilling the vows to perfection but it had a richer spiritual meaning for those who felt called to it. The most important objective of religious life was to achieve the salvation of one’s soul. Only God could judge the perfection of any given soul, and religious life was a dedicated effort to praise and love God, and to follow the spirit of his teaching through Jesus Christ. This was no easy task, as the writings of the nuns make clear. From their first acquaintance with the demands of religious life in the novitiate, their struggles to achieve perfection continued throughout their entire lives. To sustain it the church offered an abundance of devotional venues, the most important being prayer and spiritual exercises. But the foundation of religious life had to rest on a deeper sense of communion with God, which for the bride of Christ was expressed through the special bond that her status conferred to her. As the bride of Christ she owed him her love and fidelity, and he was expected to return hers with his own personal affection for her.

LOVE OF GOD AND THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

At the bottom of the desire for religious perfection was the exchange of love signified by the nun’s holy marriage. Baroque piety encouraged the romance between the professed and Christ. Love, symbolic as it might have been, found numberless forms of expression in a variety of writings that kindled the spiritual liaison between the nun and her groom.⁴¹ The biblical roots of the relationship between the soul and God, as expressed in the Song of Songs, had been used since the Middle Ages as the bases of spirituality. In sixteenth-century Spain, it was translated into vernacular Spanish by Fr. Luis de León and interpreted in an inspiring exegesis by Saint John of the Cross. This biblical text gave a highly mystical and inspiring interpretation of the love between the soul and its creator that was also the model for fashioning the relationship between the bride and Christ.⁴²

As in Spain, Mexican nuns and their biographers expanded the theme of spiritual love in biographies and autobiographies, as well as in other forms of inspirational literature. The solitude of the bride in her cell and her renunciation of the world had to find a strong compensatory source of affection in the symbolic thread that joined her to Christ. Mexican nuns had an inspirational source in Saint Teresa. In her *Seventh Morada* she refers to the special marriage of the soul and God. The Lord takes the soul to his dwelling and makes the body blind and mute, without faculties to perceive anything else. That union cannot experience separation, as it is between two people no longer betrothed, but married. She was careful to add that in such union there was no memory of the body, for it took place in the center of the soul.⁴³ While everybody concerned understood the spiritual nature of the love between Christ and the professed, its expression was bound to use the known words and imagery of love between man and woman. The totality of that love was best expressed in a set of prayers written for the nuns of San Lorenzo, in Mexico. “Sweetest Jesus, loving husband of my soul, only master of my intellect, absolute Lord of my will; target of my love, center of my hope, magnet of my desires. Sovereign Patron, Father, Creator and Redeemer of Mine.”⁴⁴ The complete absorption in God could not have been better expressed. The fine eroticism which appears in the lines of religious biographers and nun writers illustrates the many possibilities of the vocabulary of love in colonial spirituality. But there was more than mere language to that bond. There were actions and activities to demonstrate it. Christ could seek his brides in their early lives, fall in love with them and make them fall in love with him. To hagiographers, this explained the religious vocation, the irresistible attraction that bound the young child to a Christ she would eventually wed. Of María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, Joseph Bellido tells us how “the divine husband fell in love with her dove-like eyes and signaled her soul with a most vivid desire to consecrate her virginal purity to him.” She was between eight and nine years old when she made her personal vow of chastity, and from that moment on, the Lord, who had looked after her as if courting her, took into account “her willing surrender to him, and took more care in assisting her, whom he already treated as his own.”⁴⁵

One preacher’s *plática* of unknown authorship, also written in the second half of the eighteenth century, tells the nuns that as brides, their most distinctive feature was their love for God. A bride without love was not a real bride. Loving God was the dynamic center of their lives, inspiring all their actions and moving them to kindle and strengthen it. “The true bride wants only to please her husband in everything she does and thinks. All the actions of her religious life are carried through it and directed by it. She knows well that her love is only well invested when it is addressed to Jesus. To love God is to elevate oneself; to love human creatures is to lower oneself.”⁴⁶

By the time of profession that love had already waged a battle to defeat worldly temptations. The metaphor of triumph and conquest over self and evil conferred on nuns as women the valor and strength of soldiers sustained by the love of Christ. In fact, one preacher exceeded his imagination by envisioning the professing nun having conquered Christ himself and holding him forever in her arms as her captive, a defeated lover embraced by his new bride. Mixing this allusion to a lover’s embrace with the imagery of war, the preacher fused feminine and masculine values to define the merits of profession and the merits of divine love. But, by capturing Christ the bride was performing an act of possession that was uncommon in a period in which the female was always yielding rather than exerting her authority. In the dialogue of love, Christ would sometimes surrender as a husband might in human terms.⁴⁷

Divine love was a mixture of happiness and suffering. In sympathetic conjugal bonding the wife was obliged to suffer in imitation of Christ’s sufferings. This was the interpretation of Marina de la Cruz, founder of the Carmelites of Mexico City. As quoted by Sigüenza y Góngora, she found herself not measuring up to his sufferings. “Oh, goodness of my soul” she said to her beloved God, “O softest of fires in which I still do not burn, as I wished I could . . .”! She would teach her followers that “there is no other way to truly imitate Jesus Christ the husband, but that of suffering injuries and affronts for his love, and a nun lacking in this desire should not call herself a true religious.”⁴⁸ Divine love would cause physical stress. According to María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio’s biographer, after listening to the Advent spiritual talks (*pláticas*) of a preacher who lectured on divine love, she experienced a strong constriction and heat in her chest and went around holding her arms around it, trying to stop her heart from exploding from within. She became fatigued and had to restrain her strong desire to shout about her love. Her confessor, obviously a man with a practical vein, ordered her to stop attending the preacher’s talk. Only after praying many rosaries was she allowed to attend the talks again. As with other nuns, she visualized the love of God as a divine fire inside God’s heart that was transmitted to those of his brides. According to her biographer, she also experienced the transverberation made famous by Saint Teresa, in yet another example of the profound influence of the saint over nuns in the Spanish world. On that particular occasion María Anna experienced “the arrow of the loving husband wounding her heart, so strongly and deeply that she, who had experienced many other wounds in silence and discreetly, could not help but shouting while showing signs of suffocation and death.”⁴⁹ Fire and love were closely associated with the concept of a holocaust or ultimate sacrifice that the bride would experience for the groom, and were commonly used in devotional literature in the mid-seventeenth century, such as sermons and even in conventual Rules.⁵⁰ Another favorite metaphor applied to the loving bride was that

of the pure dove in the virginal state, who longs for God and attracts him. That was the line followed by Fr. Juan Antonio Rodríguez to extol the life of the founder of the Capuchin convent in Querétaro, Sor Marcela de Estrada. This chaste nun, whose habit imitated the color of doves and whose life exhibited their gentleness, received the constant loving calls (*requiebros amorosos*) of her husband, who four times called her “dove.”⁵¹

These conversations with the groom are described as *coloquios* (colloquy) and *afectos amorosos* (amorous affections) and are best appreciated in the writings of nuns themselves. Since medieval times religious women had established their own forms of expressing the love of bride and divine groom.⁵² The relationship with their loving husband was intense and personal. He often addressed them as his favorite, or the chosen one whose endearments he sought and enjoyed as much as they sought his. María de Jesús Felipa was convinced that Christ’s love accompanied her all the time, sustaining her faith and allowing her to overcome many moments of self-doubt. In her own words, his sight inflamed her heart and encouraged her to imitate his suffering. In one of her visions, and speaking of herself in the third and first persons, Sor María Marcela saw her own soul richly dressed and favored by the Lord who “as a loving husband took pleasure in the jewels and dress of his bride [herself], and manifested this to her with many caresses, leaving my soul humbled and grateful.” On another occasion she recalled how God had told her that his rigor should not intimidate her, as it was accompanied by expressions of love, “And thus spoke God to my soul, with the accustomed holy and loving kisses.”⁵³ As a token of his love for a special bride, some nuns claimed to have received special sign from Christ, often loving words or an embrace that brought them closer to him. A Carmelite from Puebla, who was under orders of her confessor not to meditate on the humanity (and thus the suffering) of Christ, alleged that after communion, Christ appeared to her “and tenderly embracing her placed her inside his chest, bringing her close to him in an amorous bond.”⁵⁴ There was reciprocity in this exchange; after she had symbolically ingested him in the host, he placed her inside of him. This metaphor of fusing mystical bodies was occasionally used by other nuns and had many precedents in medieval mystics’ writings.⁵⁵

For her part, Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad’s writings exude a deep obsession with her groom, whom she addressed with constant endearments such as “my sweet beloved” (*dueño*), “my sweet love,” or “owner of my freedom.” In one of several poems dedicated to him, she complains how he has abandoned her and how she waits for him in hope. “As soon as I see you/ I will be consoled/ my beautiful one/ Husband of my soul/ You are so beautiful / And with so many charms/ You hold me your captive, imprisoned.”⁵⁶ In the mid-seventeenth century, Sor Josefa de San Lorenzo, of the convent of San Lorenzo, wrote a poem on the nature of her love to God. After an exchange between her and her confessor Domingo Pérez de Barcia, he sent her a poem and an image of Jesus as a child. She responded to him with her own poem, which began by addressing the child but finished addressing the “sweet husband.” Asking Christ to stop hiding from her, she begged him to take her where she could praise him forever, “and while that happiness arrives/ receive me in your loving chest.”⁵⁷

Only a few years away, a higher poetic ability was pressed to speak about this theme. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the queen of baroque literature, wrote several poems on her own love of Christ.⁵⁸ Her love, not being blind but willing and licit, still tormented her because divine love could not satisfy the human desire to know if it was reciprocated. Reminiscing on past and “bastard” human loves, the poet understood the difference between that past and her present understanding of divine love. A poem specifically addressed to Christ embodied in the sacrament of communion is the venue for exploring an unusual idea: whether Christ, having invaded her heart, is scrutinizing the depth of her love. But rejecting that idea as canonically erroneous and outrageous, she concludes that his omniscience can tell that she belongs to him, and therefore his own feeling for her is love and not jealousy. Delivered in her exquisite fluid and florid style, the conflict between suffering and joy is typical of sentiments expressed by other nuns.

These intimate poems and expressions of love by the nuns contrast starkly with the elegant prose of the Bishop of Puebla, Juan de Palafox, who bade farewell to his spiritual daughters by explaining the nature of the bond between the bride and the divine groom. The change from affective texts written by the nuns to the didactic analysis of the prelate in his pastoral letter is one of gender and role, and quite significant. The male teacher could preach about the correct form of love while the nuns write as women feeling love. Palafox’s text was the counterpoint to the affective discourse of the nuns, but both addressed each other in a mutual dialogue on the nature of the most sacred bond of human female and male divinity. There is an undeniable connection between the two, since the effects of pastoral care on many self-taught nuns, such as Sor Josefa de San Lorenzo, are our only evidence of the influence of the men who directed them. The pedagogy of conjugal love, as explained by Palafox, begins by reassuring the nuns of their privileged place. As the brides of Christ, they are the apple of God’s eyes. Whoever offends them, offends God. In terms of their ranking in the clerical hierarchy, he held them only second to the ordained ministers of God. That was a great concession coming from a bishop. By professing, nuns became not only the brides of God, but also the daughters of Mary, receiving the highest possible benefits from this unchallengeable combination of mother and son.⁵⁹ In return, the brides would keep complete fidelity to the Lord in the spirit of their nuptials. He was a jealous husband and demanded much from those who were his true brides. The most hideous act in a wife was to betray her husband. How much more hideous could it be, Palafox asked rhetorically, when the husband was the Redeemer and Savior of us all? Reserve all your communications and conversations for God, he advised, as a man interested in preserving the honor of another male, even if that was God himself. He tells them to avoid the distraction caused by any affective attachment because it would detract from the love owed to God. By pursuing the perfect fulfillment of their four vows, nuns would preserve their holy and spiritual marriage. They should remember that their very garments spoke of their commitment. Their veil and their habit proclaimed the absence of the husband, and the scapular they wore over their shoulders was a symbol of his cross. The bride should examine herself continuously to ensure she was following the rules of observance. Clausturation meant nothing if the heart was not constantly burning in the love of God. He especially recommended frequency in the sacrament of communion. The spiritual marriage with God was symbolically complemented by the reception in their own bodies of the body of Christ, the venue of union between him and humankind. Palafox finished his message by underscoring the comprehensiveness of the meaning of God to his brides: he was not only their husband, but also their father, lord, servant, and redeemer; the consolation of all their sufferings, the relief of their labors, the medicine for their guilt, and the crown and prize of their virtues. In other words, God was everything, the universe that contained them and in which they were contained. As a mixture of didactic and inspirational prose, Palafox’s interpretation of the ties between bride and divine husband was the finest expression of mid-colonial spirituality, which subsequently served other preachers to recast the meaning of that holy union.

One century later, divine love would have a feminine enunciation of the highest caliber. Pueblan Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio wrote *Leyes del Amor Divino* (Laws of Divine Love), a distillation of her understanding of the love of the Lord. As the title implied, divine law obliged the bride to follow certain laws of behavior, all of which would lead to a final union. The bride could occupy herself in many occupations, but none should interfere with the intimate engagement with her husband, or the loving conversations in which they pleased each other.⁶⁰ As implied by Palafox and Sor María Anna Agueda, the love of God demanded discipline and sacrifices. It forced the bride to abandon her family and renounce her love for her parents and relatives. This was the first sacrifice demanded by the groom.⁶¹ It obliged her to serve him alone and to suffer his pain. Sor María Anna echoed sentiments expressed by nuns for hundreds of years before her, that the love of God was payment enough for their obligations, as well as their inspiration and sustenance against all personal suffering they might experience themselves. Love did not exist without sacrifice.⁶² Pain was the feminine way to

emulate their husband.

The intermingling of love and pain was natural to baroque piety. Throughout their lives as brides of Christ, nuns would have many years to consider this *sui generis* mixture that raised constant personal doubts about their ability to satisfy the high standards their groom deserved.⁶³ Moments of confidence alternated with “dryness” and despair. To help them solve the anguish this process created they had a variety of devotional practices at their disposal. Daily rituals and prayers were absolutely essential to recharge their faith and to discharge their anxieties.

DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES

In daily practice, the search for the love of God and the quest for perfection in religious life were embodied in a collection of practices that provided the cloistered women with a reference framework and guidelines for their own behavior. Conventual Rules contained the practical road map for observance, which was understood as practicing the lifestyle prescribed for the Order. Rules set daily schedule of life and prayers, defined the vows, established the canonical celebrations and rituals, and prescribed the organization of activities within the convent. Conventual Rules, however, do not tell about the practices that nurtured the nuns’ faith, buttressed their spiritual objectives, and furnished venues for expressing their yearnings. These needs expressed themselves through prayer, spiritual exercises, and the special worship of favorite saints. In this chapter we can only highlight a handful of such devotional practices that, as yet, remain to be explored in greater length and belonged to a religious culture shared with that observed in Spain.⁶⁴

Prayer was the axis of religious life and the most important occupation of a nun’s life. As described by Archbishop Lanciego y Eguilaz, prayer was the food of the soul and the only means to communicate with God, demanding preparation in body and spirit.⁶⁵ Under the influence of Fr. Luis de Granada, Saint Teresa of Avila, and the Jesuit theological school, prayer in colonial Mexico was regarded by most confessors and religious writers as the touchstone for developing a rich and rewarding spiritual life.⁶⁶ Granada’s *Libro de la oración y meditación* reached over sixty-five editions in Europe by 1575. His works were the source for all subsequent exercises and meditations on the nature of Christian life.⁶⁷ According to him, prayer was an expression of devotion, and devotion was the spiritual force that God put in the human spirit to encourage humankind to serve him.⁶⁸ Prayer could be vocal and mental. The former consisted in the repetition of certain formulae and expressions of basic faith such as the Creed or the Psalms, or new ones, such as the prayers of the Rosary in honor of Mary, formally introduced as devotion in the sixteenth century. Engaging in communal prayers was a compulsory part of a nun’s daily life that she had learned in the novitiate, when she had also learned all the Rules regulating them. The professed gathered daily in the *coros* (the rooms facing the altar) to hear Mass or to engage in the prayers following the well-defined canonical hours. Only sickness could excuse attendance to the *coro*. Breviaries and books of prayers are not uncommon in the inventories of deceased nuns.⁶⁹

Trained since childhood to find solace in prayer, most nuns spent hours engaged in mental prayer, which was understood as the meditation on matters that would move the heart and the spirit to love and fear God, and to detach oneself from the world and its superficial attractions. Nuns would meditate on the perfection of God and the imperfections of self.⁷⁰ In the seventeenth century mental prayer had evolved into complex rites and patterns, many of them inspired by Saint Teresa and Ignatius Loyola. Mental prayer would mostly focus on some aspects on the life of Christ or the Virgin. Capuchin Sor María Marcela left an extensive description of her prayer schedule in her autobiography. She confessed that due to her many obligations she had little time to read, but, on the other hand, she prayed continuously throughout the day. As explained in her own words, her prayers were a mixture of ritual thanks and her own interpretation of the Ignatian “constructions of place.” The Ignatian technique taught how a person should carefully imagine the location where the topic of meditations takes place and intensely study it.⁷¹ Nuns’ mental prayer constructed a mental image of devotion and assigned a special virtue and prayer to each part of the figure. In the case of Sor María Marcela, a Capuchin from Querétaro, she tells her readers how she also said short prayers in the form of salutations, homage, and reverence to the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, and Mary Immaculate approximately four hundred times daily.⁷² Keeping an account of one’s “acts of virtue” was a practice encouraged by the nuns’ advisors. An anonymous work written for nuns wanting to worship the Heart of Christ in mid-century Puebla advised them to keep track of their prayers and thoughts to assess their degree of understanding of the exercises demanded for its worship, and thank God if they felt they did well, or become embarrassed and humble themselves if they failed in their efforts.⁷³

Capuchin nuns practiced a special form of mental prayer in which virtues were symbolized by either garments or objects upon which they fixed their meditations. For example, Sor Mariana Juana Nepomuceno, founder of the Capuchin convent of Mexico City, thought of a symbolic garment described by Mary to Saint Bridget, as follows: “Mary wore a shift of contrition and shoes of affection to amend sins, behave well, and abstain from wrongdoing. She had a tunic of hope in God, in which the sleeves were his justice and mercy. She also wore a cape of faith with splatterings of charity, a waistcoat of meditation on the passion of the Savior, and a hair-do of chastity.”⁷⁴ Such elaborate plays of mental imagery helped nuns to concentrate on prayer while performing other activities. The formalization of prayer reached a high pitch of intensity in some convents. Between 1761 and 1808, the nuns of San Bernardo, Mexico, kept yearly accounts of the number of “rescue prayers” they had accumulated as a community. These were a variety of prayers and forms of personal discipline to “rescue” Jesus from Judas’s treason and apologize for it.⁷⁵ They aimed at accumulating a large number of prayers to prove the devotion of the community.

Prayers requested, above all, the grace of God, but served many other purposes as well; among them the petitions for grace for oneself and for others were paramount. Nuns played an important role of intercession on behalf of the fate of other persons, and this understanding made convents places of reverence and respect for the laity. Since hardly any soul was supposed to go directly to Heaven, and most needed to atone for their sins in Purgatory, prayers to help redeem time for those souls in penance was an important task for nuns.⁷⁶ Pueblan Sor María de Jesús, who was unsuccessfully proposed for beatification, was reputed to have redeemed thousands of souls from Purgatory. Many of them were those of nuns and servants of her convent of La Concepción. Her biographer, Francisco Pardo, in baroque hyperbole, claimed that Sor María had saved 140 million souls on the feast of the Innocents (December 28), and redeemed a Christian emperor who had remained five hundred years in Purgatory.⁷⁷ The sisters prayed for the health of other nuns, their confessors, family members, and whoever asked them to do so. They also prayed for higher causes such as the defeat of the Devil and non-Christian heathens, for the health of the king, and his success over his enemies. If there was drought they would pray for rain, or, in case of flood, for the rain to stop. Their role was understood as an extended service to the community in the name of the love of God.

An important genre within the category of prayers were the spiritual exercises that became popular after Ignatius Loyola introduced his own, although this genre was a much older Christian tradition. Although some nuns followed Loyola’s exercises according to their confessor’s advice, most of those prayers practiced in convents followed ritualized patterns revolving around certain themes and involving some form of corporal discipline. The *Exercises of the Vindication of Christ* (*Ejercicios de los desagrazos de Christo Señor Nuestro*), practiced by the Hieronymites of Puebla in the eighteenth century, are used here as a typical example.⁷⁸ An engraving of the crucified Christ opened the text, as the anonymous writer ordered that a

crucifix and an image of Our Lady should be honored for the ten days of the duration of the exercises. An assigned group of nuns and servants would put flowers and candles before the icons every day throughout the period of the exercises. All the conventual residents, including girls, would attend the prayer sessions and “mortify” (self-inflicted discipline) themselves according to their abilities. The exercises began by asking for forgiveness and help from the guardian angels and Saint Jerome. The first morning they would spend one hour in prayer and then carry a cross or stand with arms open making the sign of the cross, or kneel praying three Our Fathers, one Hail Mary, and a prayer called “the Garden prayer” reminiscent of Christ’s prayer in the Mount of Olives. After this they would imagine visits to the house of Anna, Caiphas, Pilate (twice), and Herod. In each “house” they prayed a Pater Noster and a Hail Mary, another special prayer, and a creed of faith. In succeeding days they would pray to the crowning of Christ and recite other prayers especially composed for these exercises. One of them, for example, was as follows:

Oh, king of kings, most excellent prince, illustrious emperor. You are the life of my soul, the amorous affections of my heart, united with you, and melted by the strength of your divine and sovereign love that penetrates everything. May all that I would understand without you, perish. You are the delight of all flowers; the fragrance of all scents; the sweetness of all flavors, and the pitch of all sounds of concordance. You are the soft delight of the intimate embraces that join all those who want to serve you.⁷⁹

Such a paean to the most chaste and yet ardent of husbands also addressed him as “brother” and “companion,” and stated how the suppliant expected that the efficacy of prayer would take her to the peaks of perfection and divine union. Other prayers in these exercises were offered to the wounds of Christ while kissing the floor for each wound, an acknowledgment of the blood given by Christ for the redemption of sinners. At some point bodily punishment (*disciplina*) was self-administered. A final prayer placed the faithful before God to ask, through the intercession of Christ the son, for the pardon of all her sins and the grace of God not only for herself, but for all members of the church, princes and ministers of peace, family, friends, and even the infidel. It is obvious that these expressions of piety bound the community together and helped to establish ties among its members, strengthening the spiritual sisterhood.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz wrote a set of exercises for the nine days of the Incarnation [of Christ] and a set of prayers (Offerings) addressing the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary, dedicated to the suffering mother of Christ, *Virgen de los Dolores*.⁸⁰ These exercises could be used by lay as well as professed persons, an indication of the self-assigned, didactic nature of some nuns’ writings. Her exercises would last nine days, included confession on the last day, and acts of penance such as fasting and corporal penitence. Each day the person would repeat prayers extolling the virtues of Mary and asking for her protection. Sor Juana established the supremacy of Mary over all Heaven, with an authority inferior only to that of God and Christ. As a mother she was the vessel that had contained the immensity of Jesus. She raised him who created humankind, and was the custodian of the highest divinity. In the Offerings for the Rosary, Sor Juana prescribed meditation on the fifteen key moments of the Passion of Christ, underscoring the pain of the mother in each one of them. As such, she extended to Mary a protagonist role in the Passion of Christ. These exercises point to the centrality of the worship of Christ and Mary in conventual spirituality throughout the entire colonial period, and one that the Mexican nuns had inherited from European practices.⁸¹ As a devout Catholic, Sor Juana paid homage to that tradition.

CHRIST AS OBJECT OF DEVOTION

Within the cloisters the most revered images were those of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Mary was in strong competition with her son for the nuns’ attention and affection. There was no rivalry involved in their worship, but rather a well-understood and balanced dyad in which they complemented each other in roles, favors, and inspirational spirituality. However, Christ was the indisputable center of the Mexican devotional world, and of all the chapters in Christ’s life, the Passion was the one inspiring the greatest fervor. The Nativity and Christ the child were, comparatively, accorded less devotion in conventual worship, although it was duly observed and celebrated.

The visual image of Christ crucified had entered Christianity in the Middle Ages as a symbol of the redemption of humanity. Female mystics such as Julian of Norwich made the Christ on the cross one of the most important themes of their meditations and prayers.⁸² In the sixteenth century both Catholics and Protestants revered the cross as a symbol of Christian faith.⁸³ The desire to suffer in imitation of the last hours of Christ was deeply embedded in the ascetic life so eulogized by religious writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It had a firm theological and devotional background in the writings of Fr. Luis de Granada, whose meditations of the Passion of Christ inspired subsequent exercises and meditations on that topic.⁸⁴ To embrace the cross was, for Spanish and Mexican nuns, the highest symbolic expression of religious life.⁸⁵ The Crucifixion, as a symbol of pain, penitence, and suffering, became a model for the sacrifice to which she should aspire as she entered the cloisters. This message was central in biographical accounts, such as that of Capuchin Sor Mariana Leocadia (d. 1729). Her profession was described as an embrace of the cross, to repay Christ’s sacrifice for humanity. The religious vows nailed the nun to religion, and all the penitential acts of her life were extolled as practices that prolonged the suffering that her privileged soul offered to her divine husband. Religious life, according to her biographer, should be a continuous act of martyrdom.⁸⁶ Even if the nun herself never expressed such feelings, her biographer could attribute them to her. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz received a posthumous accolade as a “crucified nun” by her biographer Juan de Oviedo, S.J., as he wrote of the transformation he claimed she seemed to have experienced during the last years of her life. She, in his words, left the world to be with her divine husband, “and considering Him nailed to the cross for the faults of men,” she began to imitate him, “seeking in earnest to crucify her passions and appetites with . . . fervent rigor in her penitence.”⁸⁷

The popularity of the devotion to the cross became a much used metaphor of the life of the nun herself and remained popular through the end of the eighteenth century. In 1743, Fr. Juan Crisóstomo López de Aguado, preaching at the profession of Sor Margarita de Santa Teresa in Santa Catalina de Sena, in the city of Valladolid, recommended to the novice to have the bleeding figure of Christ before her eyes all throughout her life.⁸⁸ The theme was also used in funeral sermons, as it was in that given for Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad’s death, which compared her to “a crucified dove.” Fr. Miguel de Alcaraz, who approved the publication of the sermon, added his own advice to the nuns, telling them how to behave as doves in intimate contact with the crucified Christ: “Then, thus crucified, ask to drink with your beak the sweetness of his most sacred side; to touch with the tip of your wings the wounds of his sovereign hands, and to reach with your feet, the wounds of his sacred feet.”⁸⁹ Thus, nuns became protagonists in the Passion by imitating the Christ in his last agony in metaphors of morbid sensuality. The intimation of close contact with the body of Christ in an act of covering it while drawing the nurturing liquid of his wound was as close as one could get in terms of intimacy with the groom. Soon enough the mental imagery conveyed by words found its way to a visual one. In 1805, a rather audacious engraving achieved a visual representation of the profession as the ultimate sacrifice by presenting a nun on the cross with her body completely covering that of Christ, whose only visible parts are his head, arms, and

feet.⁹⁰

The worship of Christ crucified could extend from a personal devotion to one including the convent and its church. This was the case of the Carmelite convent of Santa Teresa la Antigua, in Mexico City. There, an image of Christ crucified known as the Christ of Ixmiquilpan, began to be venerated after a miraculous “renovation” in 1621.⁹¹ Its story, written by the chaplain of the convent, Dr. Alonso Velasco, tells how the papier-mâché image had been brought from Spain in 1545 by Alonso de Vil-laseca, one of the most munificent church patrons of the sixteenth century. In 1615, this Christ was in a modest church in the mining town of Plomo Pobre, close to the town of Ixmiquilpan, whose name it took. By that time the image was blackened, and its moth-eaten head had almost disappeared. Juan Pérez de la Cerna, Archbishop of Mexico, ordered it to be removed from public viewing and buried with the first old person who died in the town. His order was not carried out and five years later some mysterious happenings began to take place in the small church. Noises were heard and mysterious figures of monks were seen. On April 11, 1621, the image was taken out by the townspeople to ask God for rain. Miraculously, it rained the same afternoon. On May 19, on the vespers of the celebration of the Ascension of Christ, the image was discovered to be sweating and to have been completely restored to its glorious prime. The image continued to sweat water and blood, and an investigation carried out by an emissary of the Archbishop of Mexico resulted in more sweating and emission of bright light and miraculous cures.

Disregarding the opposition of the town’s Indians, the image was removed from its site and temporarily placed in the town of Ixmiquilpan, where it was visited by hundreds of people. Archbishop Juan Pérez de la Cerna ordered it to be transported to Mexico, and after it spent a few days in his chapel, he decided to give it to the convent of Carmelite nuns of San José. The archbishop had been instrumental in the convent’s foundation and was very fond of it. Archbishops Francisco Manso y Zúñiga and Francisco Aguiar y Seijas helped to increase devotion to this image, which received a sumptuous chapel, funds, and patronage from other rich laymen. By the end of the seventeenth century this was one of the most venerated images in the city, enhancing the reputation of the convent of Santa Teresa as a center of piety.

Another well-known crucified Christ was that of the Dominicans of Santa Catalina in Valladolid, known as the Christ of the Nuns. The icon was the object of veneration in the city and prayed to in times of natural catastrophes. On such occasions, such as in 1706 and 1720, the image was removed to the Cathedral Church for public prayers. In 1738, when the nuns moved to a newly built cloister, they and their icon were accompanied by all the members of the Cathedral Chapter in a public procession captured in a large oil painting for historical posterity.⁹² This public extension of a private worship was essential to inscribe the convent in the community.

THE SACRED HEART

In the seventeenth century the heart was still a symbolic site of love, divine as well as human. The human heart’s configuration contained, according to one preacher, a symbol of the cross. Its concave center was the source of four rivers of life which formed a cross delivering vitality throughout the body.⁹³ If the human heart contained such a high symbol of Christianity, the faithful could expect wonders from the heart of Christ. Worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus began in New Spain in the seventeenth century and some convents of Puebla and the Carmelites were especially devoted to it. Privileged nuns were said to have been allowed to see the heart of Jesus in several ways. For example, Sor Beatriz de los Reyes (d. 1608) was supposed to have been allowed to see Christ’s heart bleeding abundantly. Christ, in fact, was said to have promised this vision to those with a chaste heart.⁹⁴ Puebla Carmelites prided themselves on having a relic of the heart of Saint Teresa, which was the site of miraculous visions by several nuns who saw Saint Teresa, the Virgin Mary, and a bleeding face of Christ in it.⁹⁵ Word spread about these sightings and the convent earned a reputation as a center of spirituality. In a gesture reasserting the symbolism of the heart as a center of affection, Bishop Fernández de Santa Cruz, best known for his exchange with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, but also a promoter of a shelter for women, donated his heart to the convent of Santa Mónica, a foundation he had promoted. The nuns kept it as a relic, and they had an oil portrait of the bishop holding his heart in his hand and a phylactery (painted legend) stating his last will: “Daughters, pray to God for him who gave you his heart.”⁹⁶ In turn, he promised, once in Heaven, to pray for the convent.

Saint Teresa’s transverberation, the piercing of her heart by an angel as a symbol of the love of God, contributed much to the expansion of the worship of the Sacred Heart, as well as fixing the human heart as the place where some of the most exquisite experiences of religious life took place.⁹⁷ The heart acquired a double meaning as a locus where the professed could experience emotions as expressions of God’s love to her, as well as the center of her love for him. If the cross reminded humanity of Christ’s suffering, his heart was a symbol of vitality and life for the faithful. As recompense for a life dedicated to Christ, Pueblan Carmelite Sor Isabel de la Encarnación several times enjoyed the privilege of having Christ recline his head on her heart, and before her death, she was “allowed to experience him in her heart as a most beautiful lamb.” This provoked such flames of love in her chest that sparks of fervent affections burst outside.⁹⁸ Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, who earned a reputation as a mystic, and the author of a long spiritual diary, experienced either intense oppressions or expansions in her heart when she felt that God favored her in any way. She also claimed having a special vision of Jesus and Mary in which her heart played a key role. As a large ball decorated with gold and resplendent with many gems that shone with a light not of this world, her heart was held in Christ’s hand, while she begged him to also give it to Mary, so that the latter could make it even better and more worthy of him.⁹⁹ This type of vision was not unique to her, as other nuns reported similar visions of hearts changing hands as part of the religious imagery of the period that tied together the themes of love and reward in this life as well as in the next. In the mid-eighteenth century, Sor María de Santa Clara strengthened the worship of the Sacred Heart in her *Subida al Monte de Mirra*, a set of devotional exercises. She prescribed one hour of meditation on Christ’s love, as contained in his heart, and on the many affronts his love suffered during his lifetime and after his death by his enemies and those who did not serve him well. She urged the brides of Christ to imitate Jesus in his suffering and recommended the worship of his heart on an altar dedicated to that effect.¹⁰⁰

MARY THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

Since the late Middle Ages Mary, as Queen of Heaven, was considered humankind’s universal protector and intercessor before her son. She answered their prayers and appeared to visionaries not only as mediator but as the center of strong Mariological devotion.¹⁰¹ Mary was the fixed star around which the lives of her professed daughters revolved. Her example was a source of inspiration, and in practical terms Mary was their shelter and helped them to achieve perfection.¹⁰² After the Council of Trent (1543–65), the Immaculate Conception of Mary became one of the driving forces in Catholic devotion. She was assumed to have been born exempt of Adam and Eve’s stain in order to become the vessel for divinity. Although the assumption of her Immaculate Conception did not become dogma until 1854, the fervor it inspired in seventeenth-century Mexico expressed itself in numerous sermons, devotional writings, and personal vows of allegiance to defend the concept. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, for example, made a vow of faith and a protestation to defend the “sacred mystery of the Conception” on February 17, 1694.¹⁰³

The female convents bearing the names of events in Mary’s life or her special iconic representations are only a hint of her popularity. In Mexico City

there was Regina Coeli (Queen of Heaven); La Concepción in San Miguel el Grande, Mexico, Puebla, and Irapuato; Our Lady of the Incarnation in San Cristóbal de las Casas; Our Lady of Consolation in Mérida; Our Lady of La Salud in Pátzcuaro; Our Lady of Solitude in Puebla; Our Lady of Zaragoza and Our Lady of Balvanera in Mexico City; and Our Lady of Guadalupe in the town of that name and in Aguascalientes.¹⁰⁴ There were also two Jesús María convents, one in Mexico City and one in Irapuato. The devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, which evolved from the mid- to late-seventeenth century, was not popular among Mexican nuns before the mid-eighteenth century, even though some nuns began to take the name Guadalupe in the early years of that century. Our Lady of Guadalupe was officially proclaimed patron of Mexico in 1746.¹⁰⁵ In the second half of the eighteenth century the worship of Guadalupe seems to have expanded among nunneries but it never displaced some of the other traditional religious icons of Mary. An exception to this was the convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla. The Hieronymite Order had traditionally worshiped the Spanish Virgin of Guadalupe, and they seem to have transferred their worship to the Mexican Guadalupe. In 1754, the convent made a formal vow of allegiance to Guadalupe after a “miraculous” cure of several nuns who had suffered from epilepsy.¹⁰⁶

The devotional literature on Mary includes many sermons preached on the dates associated with events in her life. The worship of the Immaculate Conception was possibly the most popular worship among nunneries. On the day allocated for this celebration (December 8), some convents paid for a special mass and a preacher who would extol Mary as well as the community of cloistered women, her daughters and protégées.¹⁰⁷ The expression of the fervor inspired by Mary was not confined to male preachers. As we have seen, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz had a special devotion to Mary, and she dedicated several of her *villancicos* (songs to be sung in church) to her. Her chosen themes were the Assumption of the Virgin, the Incarnation, and the Immaculate Conception. Written between the 1670s and 1680s, they suggest her lasting interest in these themes.¹⁰⁸ Their complexity demands a literary rather than a historical analysis, but the themes of Mary as queen, mirror of justice, purely conceived as well as conceiving Christ in chastity, are developed by Sor Juana in a rather “new worldly” style, insofar as she even includes African characters and African speech in some of them to reflect the inclusiveness that the Marian celebrations should elicit.

Other expressions of Marian devotion were prayers that circulated among nunneries. As an example, I will cite a novena, a set of prayers to be said over nine days, to honor Mary at her presentation in the temple. It was written by a nun of the convent of Santa Inés de Monte Policiano, Puebla, whose modesty forbade her to publicize her name.¹⁰⁹ After a declaration of penance (contrition), the nun instructs her sisters on their daily prayers and their objectives. The first day they would focus on the virtue of obedience, in imitation of how Mary, obeying her parents Saint Ann and Saint Joachim, presented herself in the temple. The exercises consisted in praying fifteen Hail Marys and kissing the earth in honor of the divine child Mary, followed by a prayer composed by the writer asking Mary to help them to obey God and observe his precepts, as she had done. Two more Hail Marys and Our Fathers, in addition to a prayer to Mary’s parents, ended the devotional exercise for the day. On subsequent days the prayers extolled humility, patience, purity, charity, prudence, justice, and strength and love of God. Each day they asked Mary to grant them those virtues. The final prayer combined all the virtues as embodied in Mary, asking her to intercede for them and allow their hearts to burn with the love of God.

Another variation of Mary’s worship was that of her bodily ascent to Heaven (Assumption) after her death, celebrated on August 15. The Clares of Querétaro celebrated this feast with a three-day procession within the convent.¹¹⁰ The celebration of the Assumption of Mary contested the notion that the birth of Christ was Mary’s greatest achievement. Her high placement in Heaven in close proximity to Christ was regarded as her final apotheosis, and came as close as it could be to her consecration as a divinity. The observance of this day gained much of emotional and devotional purchase in the seventeenth century. An anonymous exercise dedicated to Mary’s Assumption lauded Mary as, “in the mind of her creator a sum of perfections, a Psalm of beauty, an example of chastity, an icon of humility, a norm of virtue, the archive of divine grace and the precious ark of all treasures.”¹¹¹ After contrasting her perfection to their own imperfections, nuns were advised to place themselves in Mary’s care. She would help them in carrying out their duties as nuns and learning how to love her crucified son as they should. In fact, Mary was the best teacher on how properly to revere her own son, a role that seemed to be as meaningful to colonial Mexican nuns as it was to other Catholics of the period. Mary’s Assumption was remembered “as the happiest day in which she made the most glorious voyage from this vale of tears to that [place] of eternal happiness, scenting the air with the purest amber of her virtue.” Once there, “she was received with angelic songs and there was universal joy as all angels and saints came to receive her in the company of Jesus.” Then she was crowned “queen of heavens and earth, and judge of all its courtiers,” “as she sat in her eternal and resplendent throne,” very close to that of God. The visual impact of this prayer was similar to that of the visions experienced by nuns of the period, and it was effective in building ties between the professed women and their eternal mother. The prayer called her “sweetest sovereign mother, advocate, patroness, wisest of mothers . . . daughter of the Eternal Father, purest mother of his most sacred son, most gracious bride of the Holy Spirit, and sacred vessel of the perfect unity [who contains within herself the three persons in one infinite power].”¹¹² Mary is presented as spouse of the Holy Spirit, an interesting definition of the conception of Christ. It is apparent that Mary was more powerful after her death than in life, and her enthroned, resplendent figure appealed to cloistered women as the highest symbol of womanhood triumphant.

VISIONS

Visions had been a part of the experience as well as the hagiography of Christian women since the Middle Ages.¹¹³ According to Jodi Bilinkoff, visionaries did not begin to flourish in Spain until the sixteenth century when Teresa of Avila and others began to write about their extraordinary mystical raptures and visions.¹¹⁴ Saint Teresa became the most important model of observance for seventeenth-century Mexican nuns, who embraced not only her but the religious culture of seventeenth-century Spain as well.¹¹⁵ Visions were understood as special favors of God to his brides as a reward for their love, their observance, and their faith. It was through the privilege of visions that religious women had a special understanding of divinity and Heaven, since learning theology was not supposed to be appropriate for them. Visions were experiences accessible only to a few, because reception of such divine apparitions implied a special distinction in virtue and a higher degree of spirituality. Despite this understanding, the attention received by distinguished Spanish visionaries motivated many lay and religious women to claim that prestige, and visions reached an alarming familiarity in popular piety and hagiographical writing. The testimonials of those who claimed to have “witnessed” Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, and engaged in direct communication with divine entities, created a world of marvelous “realities” that stimulated popular faith and even awed some men of the cloth. Amidst that abundance there were many false claims that confessors were supposed to detect and the Inquisition to punish. The Vatican was obliged to rein in this flood of visions by subjecting all claims of special signs of communication with God to rigorous examination, especially if they came from the laity. All hagiographic narratives alleging special illuminations and visions had to disclaim any pretense of sanctification to those graced with them because only the Vatican could determine sanctity.¹¹⁶ In 1607, Fr. Leandro de Granada published a treatise on the nature of visions and a doctrinal analysis of such revelations in order to aid the faithful and, even more so, their confessors, by differentiating between genuine orthodox visions and those resulting from the devil’s deceit.¹¹⁷

Most historians of European and Spanish American mysticism have implied that visions were part of the mystic experience, although a visionary and a mystic were not the same.¹¹⁸ A woman could have visions but lack the charismatic signs that identified her as a mystic. Many of the lay visionaries under inquisitorial examination also lacked the religious pedigree and training that nuns could claim, although the latter were not exempt from supervision and sometimes suspicion. To be recognized as a mystic, a nun had to prove an intensity of religious practice capable of passing the rigorous test of her own confessor and other authorities appointed by the bishop or archbishop of her diocese. Doctors in mystical theology, such as Miguel Godínez, instructed their colleagues on how to recognize a mystic. While seventeenth-century methods for such inquiry had no “scientific” base whatsoever, there were some recognizable and well-defined stages in mystic development that they all looked for. Mysticism was understood as a process of union with God that required a progressive disengagement of the world followed by the understanding of his divinity and the eventual final “union” or experience of his presence.¹¹⁹ Reflecting the well-established canons of his time, Godínez identified three classic stages in the progress toward a mystic experience. They were the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive ways (*vías*).¹²⁰ In the purgative stage the individual divested herself of cares and sins; the illuminative stage gave understanding of God; and the unitive was when the final union or transcendental experience was achieved. Strictly speaking, visions are not part of the unitive stage, when the experience of God is ineffable or unexplainable and there is a total suspension of the elements of the human being: memory, will, and understanding. Visions were metaphors, so to speak, of the grace of God that could give the person a clue of how she stood before God. They were full of symbolic meaning and it was up to the visionary and her confessor to decipher them.¹²¹ Visions were not supposed to be experienced with the senses of the body but with the grasp of the intellect as symbols of a divine reality that transcended the physicality of this world. Nonetheless, since the Middle Ages, visions had been expressed in physical terms, in strongly sensory wording involving sight, sound, smell, and touch, because humans had no other means of communicating the contact with divinity.

The variety of visionary experiences in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mexico indicates their full acceptance as venues to perceive and understand the ultraterrestrial reality of Heaven or Hell. They are personal, as related in autobiographical or spiritual writings of the nuns, or hagiographical, as found in the lives of nuns or the histories of religious order written by men. The former are, strictly speaking, accounts of an intimacy lacking in the latter, which are secondhand narratives mediated and sometimes greatly enhanced by the writer, even though the visions described by biographers are based on nuns’ writings and/or testimonials of their contemporaries. Testimonials of visions written by nuns have a more intimate character and, while sometimes lyrical, they lack the hyperbole found in men’s writings. The most emblematic descriptions of visions by a male writer are those of Carmelite Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, author of a mid-seventeenth-century chronicle of his Order. Among the visions that he and some of his contemporaries relished the most were those in which nuns were assailed by demons and satanic venues of temptation, such as aggressive animals and lewd men. The virile attributes lacking in ordinary women sprang to life in the determined, pious, suffering, but heroic and almost martial sisters of the Order who engaged in constant battles with such demonic entities, symbols of the constant challenges to religious life and the virtue and faith of the Carmelites. The turgid language and wild situations described strike the modern reader as exaggerated appeals to emotional empathy. For example, Fr. Agustín claimed that the worship of the Assumption of the Virgin practiced in this convent made the demons so furious that “some times they [the nuns] have seen an army with flags, fifes and drums, of the enlisted infernal furies circling the convent, giving such battle to the religious that they needed all the strength of grace.”¹²² The demons that pursued Pueblan Carmelite Sor Isabel de la Encarnación throughout her life took the shape of snakes, attractive and lubricious young men, lions, tigers, rabid dogs, and javelins. “Sometimes they were on top and beneath her cell as if they were rolling armed carts or hitting the walls with picks and bars attempting to tear them down, and sometimes they entered her cell as a pack of mares.”¹²³ Isabel de la Encarnación was under the suspicion of the Inquisition for her visions and was quizzed and examined by many confessors, some of whom did not believe her accounts. Her sisters in religion supported her and eventually she gained the respect of the men in her own Order. The baroque nature of this and other male writers’ texts speaks out of willful constructions, the imprint of a male vision on the female experience. They are parallel expressions in which they speak out their own imagination as triggered by the source. As men spoke for women, or on women, they were creating alternative reinterpretations. However, both women’s visions and men’s writings fit into each other to create a composite of the baroque religious imagination.

Female narratives stand on their own, separate from the use men gave to them, and have the advantage of bearing witness to their own experience.¹²⁴ To gain a closer look at their world, I will examine several of them in the rest of this chapter, in the understanding that these are only samples of a much richer spectrum of personal expressions. The writings of some visionaries and other nuns receive additional attention in Chapter 10. In the seventeenth century two important visionaries left a record of their own: Mothers María Magdalena Lorravaquio and María de San José. Mother María Magdalena Lorravaquio professed on July 20, 1590, in the convent of San Jerónimo, Mexico, at age fifteen. Afflicted by a long sickness, she spent many years in bed with limited mobility. To compensate, she developed a rich inner life with many visions, which she transcribed for the examination of her two Jesuit confessors. In her precise description the process of rapture (*arobo*) begins during prayer, the means to communication with God. Recogimiento (recollection) or a folding within oneself was the result of prayer and the preface to the visionary experience. When the vision occurred, she felt suspended and often transported to places that were largely desolate. When she returned from her visions, sometimes shaking, she repeated a formulaic statement of her willingness to serve God. On several occasions she said she saw with the eyes of the body and those of the soul, but progressively adopted the orthodox enunciation of seeing with the eyes of the soul only.

In visionary raptures sight dominates, but other senses are by no means absent. Most of the nuns heard voices or entire messages and entered into long conversations with God, Mary, or other divine beings; they even felt the texture of objects or smelled the perfumes of Heaven and the fetid vapors of Hell. Since the Middle Ages, visual arts had conveyed information to the faithful, and it is not surprising to find strong pictorial elements in all visions.¹²⁵ Although Mother María Magdalena seemed occasionally to have experienced the unitive-mystic stage, she privileged her visions in her narrative. They seemed to have left a strong impression in her sedentary life. However, visions were more than sensory experiences; they were parts of a total state of abstraction for those who experienced them and who, during the trance, disengaged themselves from the sensations of their own bodies. As Mother María Magdalena stated: “My heart seemed to have died leaving my body unprotected and I was in suspension for such a long time that I could not use the senses of my body; it seemed that I was dead in my soul; such was the grief due to the absence of God that it kept me motionless.”¹²⁶ Like other visionaries, María Magdalena maintained a special loving and languorous relationship with Christ, who never satisfied her desire for more of him. She burned with an interior flame, and on seeing Christ on the cross in one of her visions she was so moved that she screamed, rather than talk, to him about her love; on other occasions they engaged in “amorous colloquies.”¹²⁷ In one of her visions Christ descended from the cross and, reaching her soul, brought it closer to his body.¹²⁸ That desire to get closer to the crucified Christ and to touch his flesh was an evocative theme mixing hope and frustration, and was shared by other visionaries in this period. María Magdalena also shared with others a veneration of the wound on the side of Christ, an open gate to his body and source of his blood that they sought as the divine nurturing liquid that would let them understand and partake of his Passion. Christ’s wound provided an access to his chest and the possibility of a more intimate contact with his body as well as a locus for exercising one’s charity. To kiss his wound was to partake of his pain as well and somehow to help it heal.¹²⁹ Also typical of her times was María Magdalena’s interest

in the souls in Purgatory, for whom she prayed and about whom she showed a growing interest toward the end of her book.

Another visionary writer of the late seventeenth century who left an extensive record of her life and spiritual world was Pueblan Augustinian Sor María de San José, whose visions began when she was a young girl, long before she professed.¹³⁰ As a young girl she had visions of Mary, in her role of intercessor, promoting her betrothal to the baby Jesus, an episode echoing a similar experience in the life of Saint Catherine of Siena. Just before her profession she saw herself appearing before God, who forgave all her sins, erasing them from the book of her life, much to the chagrin of the Devil.¹³¹ This was an obvious inner desire that she made a reality, a self-fulfilled wish, in her vision. As a nun she had frequent visions, mostly of Jesus and Mary, the latter in several of her iconographic representations such as Guadalupe and Our Lady of Solitude. These were not visions of a static nature in which the soul contemplated the marvels of Heaven. María de San José was constantly engaged in a dialogue, especially with Christ. The colloquies exuded intimacy and confidence in each other. He addressed her as “my beloved bride” and she called him “husband of my soul” as she begged for more suffering. In this conversation he explained his sacrifice, welcoming his bride with words of consolation and sometimes showing unique signs of closeness.

The gallant encounters between them reached some unusual moments of private solace in each other that revealed the nature of the nun’s visionary-erotic vein, and her probable knowledge of the Song of Songs. Around Holy Week of an undated year, María de San José had the opportunity of placing her lips on Christ’s wound and experiencing an ineffable moment of union. Shortly thereafter, Christ came from the altar, embraced her very closely and asked her to drink “by the mouthful from the river of my sweetness and love.” “Rest in my arms, since you are in such travail.” For several days thereafter she felt like “a flame of love.” Such intimate encounter gave Sor María a role as protagonist in her relationship with Christ. In a reversal of roles, he comes to her to ask for something she can give him and in her charity is willing to offer. This exchange of places between the nun and Christ portrays the closest of intimacies and exemplifies the craving for love these religious women cradled in their hearts. These incidents were crowned by one close union after Jesus complained to her about his suffering over those who crucified him again with their sins. “On hearing this, I felt and saw how His Majesty began joining and uniting with me, in such a way that I came to place my lips on those of my Lord.”¹³² This fascinating moment was not a source of love but of pain, because she came to realize that in that moment Christ was giving her the understanding of how two people had joined to commit a sin somewhere in the city. In a way, her own kiss and union was simply a venue to remind her of the sins of others. María de San José gave a new twist to the intimacy with her Lord, converting those moments of closeness to ones of suffering with him because of the sins of others, thus removing any thought of joy. There was a potential reward in this communion of pain, however. On one occasion Christ took her heart and “ate it up bit by bit.” In this novel twist of the theme of the Sacred Heart and holy food, Christ explained to her that there was no “morsel sweeter or better seasoned than a heart hammered by trials, and since I found yours so beaten by all that you have suffered, it was therefore seasoned to my liking.”¹³³ The reciprocity of the gesture is unusual since most commonly the faithful ingests Christ, and not the other way around. Partaking of each other’s hearts was an almost conjugal moment of intimacy and elevated María de San José’s heart to a state of grace strong enough to become food for Christ.¹³⁴ It seems that María de San José was pushing the limits of the religious imaginary with metaphors of a culinary and gustative nature that led to erotic feelings. The immediacy of seasoning and eating brought the act of a reversed Eucharist to the domain of domesticity. The boundaries between the spiritual and the material world intermingle to express what for her was the highest expectation of privacy with her divine husband.

The visionary tradition stretched into the eighteenth century. If there were airs of renovation in the church, and a growing dislike for affective religiosity, it certainly did not apply to nuns’ writings and their religious imagination.¹³⁵ Among the least known are Querétaran Capuchin Sor María Marcela Soria and Sor María de Jesús Felipa, a Franciscan professed in San Juan de la Penitencia, Mexico. Another visionary of note was Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad. Since I survey more extensively the writings of Sor Sebastiana and Sor María Marcela in Chapter 10, here I will briefly review those of Sor María de Jesús Felipa. Her visions also center on Christ and the satisfactions derived from the spiritual union with her groom. She wrote a spiritual diary for her confessor, of which only the period between February and December 1758 remains. While not much is known of her life, her writing identifies her as a visionary in the tradition of the preceding centuries. Sor María de Jesús Felipa’s visions are a rich blend of sensory and spiritual experiences. Her heavenly world resembled a court of brilliant colors and impressive pomp. In the month of June, for example, she recounts a vision of a procession of angels and saints, especially her favorites Saint Francis, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Augustine, and Saint Dominic. On another occasion she recounts how she experienced a vision with all her bodily senses. “I experienced the same that the soul felt, in tasting, looking, smelling, listening and touching.... It seemed to my senses such a soft sight, such a sweet sound, and penetrating smell, that [they] comforted all my nature. The pleasure penetrated my bones; the touch was as though my body were lying in delicate and soft cotton wool.”¹³⁶

Her dialogues with Mary, Jesus, and her guardian angels suggested that she had achieved personal grace in their eyes, and conveyed to her reader spiritual points that they explained to her. In her colloquies with Mary the latter confirmed that she was to be chosen by God and advised her to be the best bride to her son and continue her own good works in his name: “Pay attention María, for I am calling you and invite you through the grace of my name to be even more in love with Jesus because Jesus is your fortress in the combats of this world.”¹³⁷ In turn, Jesus urged her and other souls to worship his mother. If the souls would take her as their godmother, he stated, they would benefit greatly, because her intercession has restrained his own anger on many occasions.¹³⁸ The pedagogical nature of the visions remained one of their most important characteristics. However, they involved more than religious messages. Her conversations with God would address some aspects of daily life in the convent. In August, after she took communion, she experienced a recollection and a long conversation in which God explained to her what was his wish in the election of the abbess. Then he proceeded to tell her how she was his “special one” and how his love for her and her grace led him to protect the entire convent. Nothing that she requested would be denied. Every word of the conversation, she wrote, was like food for her, and all her senses felt the grace of God.¹³⁹ Visionaries were not totally detached from the inevitable foibles of daily life. The reassurance provided by the vision could have given her opinion authority among sisters in religion. We do not know if she shared these visions with other nuns, but other data, gathered from men’s hagiographies, suggest that they did, in which case envisioning had an immediate effect on the community as well as on the receptor.

God also reaffirmed her authority to write through her visions, a theme common to other women’s writings. As his bride, she wrote that he told her, “I have anointed you with the mark of my greatest esteem and this, although hidden, will become visible in your writing.”¹⁴⁰ Here his word becomes hers through the act of writing, a powerful tool in her hands, and one of the most obvious intentions of the vision. A peculiar trait of her spiritual encounters was the company and advice of her guardian angels, who often explained the meaning of many situations to her, and, especially, her role as a writer of God’s message. They reiterated that her writing was God’s mandate and encouraged her to use all the paper she needed for that purpose.¹⁴¹ Visions provided nuns with an impeccable authority for writing. Always under the scrutiny of their prelates, nuns could recall visions to wield an arm that the church could and would respect. This is patently obvious in this diary. As her writing progressed the visions became more frequent. Sor María de Jesús Felipa seems to have gained in confidence despite frequent bouts of self-doubt.

Visions in Mexican nuns are commentaries on their own struggles and understanding of their faith, as well as a reaffirmation of their strong wills. Sustaining the post-Tridentine scrutiny of the soul was a difficult experience for visionaries. Under the sometimes merciless eyes of confessors and inquisitors, visions helped them to define themselves as women as well as believers. These fascinating psychological phenomena projected many of their own desires for recognition and authority.¹⁴² Unlike some medieval visionaries, Mexican visionaries did not interpret or reinterpret ecclesiastical texts.¹⁴³ Visions helped them to understand and strengthen their decision to profess and nurture the bonds they established with the key divine agents in which they believed. A brief survey of the visionary experience is necessarily insufficient to explore its meaning in full, but should help to encourage a focused analysis of the meaning of piety and devotion among women religious, and how visions infused the personal life of nuns with a sense of direction and fulfillment. There was also a world of believers around visionaries that put their trust in these extraordinary means of communication with God, and who sustained the long-term belief in the expressions of affective spirituality and the power of images and miracles. Some of the visionaries were not religious, but lay beatas who, lacking, or not desiring, access to the convent, claimed similar access to divine authority. The grip of the visionary imagination was very strong in baroque Mexico.

The review of the perimeters of nuns' faith and its expression in several forms of pious devotions reminds us that faith had a central role in monastic life and no study of conventual life could be complete without taking account of the meaning of their spiritual life. The significance of the religious vows in providing the foundations for that life is essential. They established the point of departure for observance, which was the internal and external discipline that all religious had to observe as binding and irrevocable commitments to which body and soul became accountable in perpetuity. All activities and thoughts of the professed nun had the vows as inflexible guidelines that served as much as models as sources of inspiration and venues to inscribe her within the community. It is also in the vows that one finds the base for understanding the concept of marriage to Christ, developed in its many nuances through devotional practices, and so deeply rooted in the making of a personal identity for the professed. Devotions were expressions of faith and exercises for the spirit. If the vows were ties that bound, devotions were means of releasing the faith they professed. Seen as food for the soul, the devotional life of religious men and women is an extensive field with infinite possibilities of analysis. The seventeenth century set the tone for the worship of the Passion of Christ and a firm Mariology that would pervade throughout the colonial period.

On the other hand, the spiritual life that nurtured their ambitions of becoming perfect in the eyes of Christ had to accommodate itself to the demands of daily life. Life in the convent was not all devotion and prayer. There were rules of personal behavior and hierarchies in rank that needed to be learned and observed; there were religious rituals to be followed, bodies to be fed and nursed when ill, personal and communal needs to be attended to, and the final confrontation with the inevitability of death to be reconciled with the expectation of salvation. None of these aspects of daily life was totally separated from the spiritual life. In all of them the observant nun could find a connection to her own faith. The ties between the world and the spirit may not have been obviously apparent to the casual observer, but in the ordering of the daily chores of the convent, the religious mind saw means of living its destiny. It is also true that the ties with the world, the indulgences of the body, the temptations of power, and the dangers of affective ties were real. In religion, the nuns struggled to become perfect, but perfection was not inherent to the human condition. In the following chapters we will follow the life of the nun in her closed garden to observe not a world exclusively dominated by piety and personal yearnings, but enlivened by the interaction of the many human interests of their lives with the world in which they were inscribed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Government, Hierarchies, and Ceremonials

“We have proceeded, as it is the custom, to the disposition of the Table of Offices for the current triennial . . . in the most punctual observance and service of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and those religious nominated, we have judged the most suitable to their employment and exercise, and we propose them to you and submit [the list] to Your Lordship so that you amend or confirm it, at your will.”



Thus the council of officers ruling each convent addressed its prelate, bishop, or archbishop, after it had appointed the officials who would fill the different positions of governance in the convent. While the male authorities had the final say in the list offered by the nuns, most times they accepted the appointments of the latter. Effectively, nuns had a large say in their own governance, but occasionally their prelates assailed the basic rules of self-government and exercised their prerogatives, with various results, some of which will be examined in this chapter and Chapter 9. Even on those occasions, it was understood by all that running a convent demanded a carefully orchestrated set of rules and decision-making activities that maintained the community operating smoothly. When prelates intervened in the internal governance of convents, they always argued that their purpose was to preserve that order and discipline.

There were democratic elements in running the community; its members were elected in a process in which all nuns of black veil had a vote. All able bodies were expected to render some service to the needs of the community, whether administrative or physical. However, a strict hierarchical order determined by age, experience, and the rank of each individual in the government ladder undermined the concept of “democracy” and made the institution closer to a corporative unit. Nuns known as “white veiled” had no say or vote in community decisions. All women living in the cloisters obeyed the orders of the officers. While “politics” understood as the exercise of power and the manipulation of wills to achieve a specific goal in governance would seem to be alien to the spiritual objectives of convents, political maneuvers were a daily reality within their confines. The ordering of the ruling hierarchy in nunneries, their response to the ecclesiastical and royal policies, even the admission and selection of the candidates for profession were political insofar as they involved internal and external personal, social, and economic interests, sometimes explicitly stated and most times implicitly understood.

After her final profession the young nun went through a period of adjustment to conventual life that built upon what she had learned in the novitiate. It was called *Juvenado*. She was now a full-fledged bride of Christ, but there was still much that she had to learn about the governance of the community, the politics underlying personal relations and relations with ecclesiastical authorities, the anxieties caused by finances, and the many petty details of life that demanded solution every day. Nuns in the *Juvenado* were regarded as “green” and still had little voice in determining communal decisions. They also began an arduous uphill battle with their own personal spiritual lives. Their relationship with other nuns and their own confessors could create swirls of confusion that might not lead to spiritual tranquility. They soon learned that much of the meaning of monastic life lay in the constant dialogue between the mundane and the spiritual. There was no dialectic opposition between the two of them, but rather a subtle knitting of threads that formed the complete pattern of existence for a nun.

Theological pedagogy, in its seventeenth-century flowering, regarded the economic success of a religious institution as a sign of God’s blessing and the reward for the virtues exercised within the convent.¹ But success was not the only yardstick to measure saintliness. The struggle of daily life within the convent and the problems created by its necessary contact with the world, its demands, temptations, and falsehoods, gave the nuns the opportunities to test their will, to control themselves in body and spirit, to exercise their charity toward others, and to find an ultimate meaning in their lives. Those were the crucibles where the true character of a woman religious was cast. Thus, following the intricate corridors of daily life will help to visualize the many activities that nuns engaged in within the cloister. The quotidian experience shows many transgressions and weaknesses, as well as small acts of personal heroics that contemporaries rightly understood as the expressions of spirituality. The mundane intermingled with the spirit of sacredness that was the essential foundation of religious life.

CANONICAL DAILY HOURS

Life within the convent had to follow an established order that channeled the activities of each one of its members through expected venues. The community had to revolve around an axis of predictable direction. Order was essential to sustain the high spiritual goals that each member of the convent was engaged in pursuing, and which could not be achieved outside the community itself. It was also essential to maintain a body of women confined within a limited space working with a measurable degree of coordination. Nuns had to interact with each other, since solitude was not regarded as conducive to a well-balanced spiritual life, and their activities in the convent were carefully regulated by the canonical hours that marked the rhythm of life. Each day was divided into discrete units and defined by specific prayers that gave meaning to their spiritual life and established measurable parameters of activities to which all adhered.

Although clocks were rather inaccurate, time was, nonetheless, not an abstraction but a very real venue to channel the discipline that a community required to fulfill its dual mission of individual salvation and togetherness. The canonical hours were devised in the low middle ages when Christian monasticism began to develop. They used Roman nomenclature and the concept of a day that began early in the morning and followed the sun according

to the availability of light.

Typically, a nun in the Dominican convent of Santa María la Gracia in Guadalajara observed the following schedule.²

4:00 a.m. Rise
4:30–5:00 Mental Prayer
5:00–6:30 Prayers of Prima and Tercia
6:30–7:15 Breakfast. Prayers of Sexta and Nona, with Mass and Rosary Prayer
9:00–12 noon Labor in Conventual Obligations

Noon Lunch. Spiritual Readings

1:30–2:30 p.m. Rest Period
2:30–3:00 Prayers of Vespers and Compline
3:00–5:00 Labor in Conventual Obligations
5:00–5:30 Snack and Spiritual Readings
5:30–8:00 Rest
8:00–8:30 Prayers of Laudes. Communal Discipline (once a week)
8:30–10:00 Supper in Their Cells
10:00 Retire for the Night

There were slight variations in convents of different Orders, but not many. Strict Orders such as the Capuchins would get up in the small hours of the night for more prayer, and thus enjoyed less sleep. In the mid-seventeenth century the Bishop of Puebla, Juan de Palafox, issued a set of complex Rules and daily routines for the Conceptionist nuns of his diocese. The ritual day he proposed focused on the hours of prayer but lacked specificity about activities other than the spiritual, to allow nuances peculiar to each convent.³

Conceptionist Convents. Schedule of Daily Prayers

5:00 a.m. Getting Up
5:30 Prima, Tercia, Sexta, Nona. Spiritual Lesson; Half an hour of mental prayer. Conventual Mass.
10:00 a.m. Laude. Spiritual lesson
12 noon–1:00 p.m. Lunch. Convent to close any opening to the world outside
2:30–3:00 Vespers and Compline
6:00 Matin
8:00 Supper. Response for the Dead. Prayers for souls of Purgatory

Prayers were the visible key occupation in the order established by the canonical hours. More than a verbal engagement, they were venues to elevate and purify the soul, and the means to establish contact with God. The range of prayers covered Old and New Testament themes, but all focused on the concept of worshiping God and imploring his mercy for personal salvation. Intercession for others, such as family, benefactors, confessors, ecclesiastical authorities, other members of the community, as well as the souls of the dead, was also important. As Palafox put it: “Prayer cleans the conscience of worldly cares. Perfect prayer makes us love our enemies.”⁴ Gathering for prayers and acts of the community also had a larger meaning. They bound the community together, for one and all were engaged in the same pursuit of transcending the limits of the flesh and the worldly, and achieving a final communion with God. Attendance to community prayers in the coro, the communal space for that purpose, was compulsory, with exceptions made for sick nuns. There were two coros, one on the ground floor and another on the second floor, and their location varied according to the architectural plan of each convent. In all cases, the coro faced the altar of the conventual church, but was separated from it by a grille and a curtain. The latter was drawn when the church was open for public services.⁵ Mass, meditations, and the most intimate experiences of visions and spiritual expansion took place in the coros.

A fine balance of personal and community worship was the core of religious life. One special way of achieving this was practiced by the convent of San Bernardo in the late eighteenth century. The community tallied all the spiritual acts carried out by each nun and offered them to “purchase” the redemption of Christ from the treason of Judas—and possibly the treason of all others who betrayed him. Thus, they counted the masses they had heard, the hours of mental prayer they had undertaken, the acts of mortification, fasts, disciplines, acts of faith and praise, rosaries, and spiritual exercises in which they had engaged. In all there were forty-six categories of spiritual activities in 1770 and fifty-three in 1799. Tallying the number of times they had exercised themselves in them, the community came with a total of 325,770 acts of piety in 1770, a number that fell to 125,869 in 1799, perhaps because thirty years later it may not have looked as desirable.⁶ However, in the 1770s this offering gave the nuns pride and reaffirmed their commitment to their acts of devotion. The numbers strengthened the belief that every moment of praise and prayer counted in the eyes of God.

The periods in between prayers and rituals were dedicated to mundane but necessary activities. For Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio, living in the convent of San Jerónimo in Mexico in the mid-seventeenth century, the daily routine of her life was important enough to record it in detail. Her morning was filled by prayers, spiritual lessons, readings of saintly lives, nursing her sick body, or teaching the elements of doctrine to the servants. She also engaged in some needlework (*obras de mano*) to prevent idleness. Needlework was sold by convents and the product applied to the needs of poorer sisters. After lunch, between midday and 1:00 p.m., she returned to needlework, but this seems to have also been time for spiritual lessons shared by the nuns who participated in groups of mutually supportive prayers and consultations: “We talk some about God, those of us who gather together, and I receive those who want to do this or talk to me about their needs. I receive with good will and much love the requests and travails of those who commend themselves to me, and beg His Majesty . . . with much fervor and desire for God to help them.”

Prayers preceded a small meal at 8:00 p.m., after which she again nursed her body and engaged in more reading and meditation, sometimes until 2:00 a.m. She confessed that this routine, as described, was not followed every day, because some days her prayers and spiritual involvement overwhelmed her. Sor María Magdalena was unwell for many years, and her daily schedule of activities as well as her long hours of prayers may not have been typical. She did not engage in physical work, but instead read, counseled, and developed a rich spiritual life, filled with the interpretation of visions that so frequently appeared to her and to some of her sisters in religion. Her interaction with the convent’s servants and with those who came to her for spiritual advice indicate how the individual experience gently meshed in with the conventual ordering of time. Skipping the reference to canonical hours, which she followed in her own way, due to her condition, she still lived a profoundly intense life and did not lose touch with the rest of the community.⁷

HIERARCHIES

Since the Middle Ages the diocesan church and the regular Orders had struggled to curtail the independence of female religious institutions.⁸ By the sixteenth century and in the New World, all nunneries were firmly under the governance of men of the cloth. Every bishopric had a Vicar of Nuns who oversaw the activities of the convents under episcopal jurisdiction. Regular Orders also had an appointed official, such as the Commissary among the Franciscans, who supervised those convents under their purview. All nunneries had male administrators known as majordomos, who collected income from liens and loans and the rents of their real estate properties. This majordomo was appointed by the episcopacy, taking into consideration the recommendations of local persons of integrity and those of the nuns themselves, since the sisters had many connections in the community. The majordomo had to render annual or triennial accounts and post a bond or be backed by two reputable businessmen. Such warranties did not protect convents from defaults or maladministration, but with the backing of the bishopric they could weather such incidents. The regular Orders appointed one brother to carry out similar tasks. All these men intervened in the management of the convent, which was accountable to them, whether in matters of finance or matters of spiritual administration. One may imagine the fashioning of administration as a double circle where the inner one corresponded to the women themselves and the outer one was the male hierarchy.

In the inner circle of governance, nuns had complete autonomy and exercised full control over themselves. The routine of daily life and the internal management of the convent were aptly carried out by a well-established hierarchical and respected order among the members of the community. Professed nuns, novices, and servants were integrated in a vertical line of authority shaped by age, years of profession and experience in the management of the community, personal wealth, and race. Age was respected in religious communities and older nuns carried the weight of authority, which the knowledge of the Rules and ceremonial rituals conferred on them. They had also established ties among their own peers and had occupied all the positions of management in the community for years. Their opinion was important in shaping the behavior of the community and the decision making that was required to keep conventual affairs in order.

Below the elder matriarchs was the next cohort: women in the middle years of their lives. They carried out tasks demanding responsibility, training themselves to become the leaders and administrators as the older nuns passed away. They also taught the novices and the servants. Because of their youth and lack of experience, younger nuns and novices were at the bottom of the hierarchical scale. In fact, novices were not considered members of the community and lacked voice and vote in its affairs. The white-veiled or “lay” sisters were below the professed nuns of black veil, given their menial occupations in the convent. Since they did not have to be literate, their load of prayers and religious obligations was much lighter than those of black-veiled nuns. The community of religious women was surrounded by servants, *donadas*, and slaves, who were mostly Indians or of mixed African descent. The “color” line that existed in all convents separated them from the professed nuns and novices. They were expected to follow a minimum of religious services and Christian indoctrination, but their role in the convent had few ties with the spiritual. They relieved the brides of Christ from all the physical cares of daily existence.

PROBLEMS OF GOVERNANCE

In a world of vertical hierarchies and multiple needs, the former had to be rigidly defined and blindly obeyed to satisfy the latter. If daily events broke that assumption, a crisis could ensue. The “disorder” that clerics saw as natural to the female sex had to be tamed by the imposition of a “Rule” and its observance. Discipline would rein in the potentially disruptive forces within the female sex. As Antonio Núñez, S.J. explained in his instruction for future nuns, the greatest virtue was the pursuit of their communal duties according to the Rules.⁹ This was also Bishop Palafox’s advice to the nuns of his diocese. “She who follows perfectly her Rule will achieve great sanctity. Obedience to the abbess is the knife of one’s own will.”¹⁰ The nun should accommodate her will to that of her superiors and those of her sisters and preserve the interior peace of the cloister by fighting against her own desires and renouncing her own will. A gender fact underlined by Núñez was that there were “vices” intrinsic to womanhood. Early modern clerics always assumed that women (even nuns) were biologically and intellectually the weaker sex. Nuns should speak little. A “good” tongue was an idle tongue. To speak evil of others was the worst source of discord. By following the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would like to have them do unto you,” they honored the convent. The worst type of woman in a convent was she who wished to do everything and be everywhere. Nuns should do what was assigned to them and refrain from exercising their own will. “Learn not; see not; hear not, taste not, touch not, smell not, even at a distance. Do not go where you are not called . . . do not care for that which does not concern you; do not ask for what does not pertain to you; leave for others to cook what you will not eat.”¹¹ Thus, Núñez conveyed the essence of religious detachment from the world and the utter self-denial that had to be observed in a community for it to function as a well-regulated body. Personal docility and self-negation were essential to achieve harmony in a body of such complex nature. The ideal in religious behavior was for the individual to exercise control over her body and her behavior. The ultimate ideal of communal order began within each one of the members.

Convents were the only known institutions that women ran by themselves; religious women assumed positions of responsibility which they would perform following their own sensibilities as women. In this task, however, they faced the many problems generated by living in a community, in addition to those born out of the fact that they were under the rule of male prelates. Nuns struggled to uphold the goals of their mission in life and keep their

institutions working for themselves and succeeding generations. In doing so, they bolstered their right to determine what their own future was against the sometimes overbearing power of their male superiors. However, the interaction with their prelates was an ever-present factor with which they had to deal with the utmost finesse at times. Only when the politics of self-governance and the politics of obedience to their prelates collided are we able to appreciate fully the degree to which maneuvering their parallel courses demanded careful navigation from the female community.

There were two types of religious observance: One was followed by convents of “regular” observance (*calzadas* or shod), which did not demand extreme poverty or the rigors of the “discalced” (unshod) or Capuchins. The second one, discalced, lived a more humble and demanding life of discipline, spiritual as well as physical. In both, black-veiled nuns were the pillar of the community, and on their shoulders rested the responsibility of a variety of administrative tasks. Each member of the community had a place and a function within it, expressed in the regular shifts of occupations they had to perform, and which changed according to regular elections, often held every three years. A review of these tasks provides an understanding of the ideal order and hierarchy which was essential to all cloistered communities.

THE ABBESS

At the apex of the community, the abbess, as head of her subjects, held final spiritual and social authority over the convent. She was the matriarch, assuming all responsibilities for conventual governance, and was answerable to the male authorities who oversaw the community. The abbess was assumed to be the mirror of her community and set an example in everything with her behavior. She was the guardian of the Rules of the convent, and it was her duty to see that they were followed in the letter as well as in the spirit. It was her task to administer discipline as well as to dispense charity. Her word was unchallengeable. All nuns had vowed obedience to her as a sacred duty that if transgressed was considered a mortal sin that could lead a soul to hell. Becoming an abbess was a crowning point in any nun’s life. It was assumed to be a position earned through years of service, but it was also the expression of the will of the community expressed in a “democratic” casting of votes. The Rules of the convent of San Lorenzo, in Mexico City, prescribed that the abbess (also known as *prelada* and Mother Superior) should be at least forty years old and eight years into religious life. The Rules of other houses stipulated a minimum age of thirty.¹² Candidates were expected to be mature and, as Archbishop Núñez de Haro put it, “shine in virtue, religiosity and honesty.”¹³

The election of an abbess required two-thirds of the secret vote of the community’s black-veiled nuns, and had to be ratified by the male superiors of the secular or the regular church. In case of death during her tenure, the community sought the permission of its ecclesiastical superiors to hold a new election within a few days after her burial. Typically, an abbess ruled for a three-year term, with an option for reelection in most convents. Sometimes the three-year rule was ignored, as when Sor Lorenza Bernarda, second abbess of the first Capuchin convent in Mexico City, retained her post for thirty years through many reelections.¹⁴ The Capuchins seemed to have liked long prelacies. In the eighteenth century, Sor Agustina Nicolasa María de los Dolores was abbess of the Capuchins for seventeen years.¹⁵ Other convents also leaned toward long prelacies. In San Bernardo, Mexico, Sor Benita de la Santísima Trinidad was elected abbess in 1766 and remained in that post for fifteen years until the election of 1781.¹⁶

The election of a new abbess was a solemn occasion, typically presided over by the highest male prelate available for the occasion, be it the bishop, archbishop, the Father Provincial, or the Commissary General of the Order. The activities surrounding the election express the solemnity of the occasion as well as the interplay of male and female authorities. Ritual exchanges between them and the *mise-en-scène* of this and other function were “performances” that established the authority conferred to the parties involved. The community engaged in feverish activities to clean up the convent and receive the male cortege with the most exquisite display of hospitality the convent could muster. Several days before the election the appropriate prelate announced his visit in response to the request of his presence. He answered in writing, asking the nuns to be prepared for the election by praying and commending themselves to God to carry out their duties in a spiritual and selfless manner. The election of a Mother Superior in San Juan de la Penitencia in 1780 was announced to the city with full pealing of bells, and preceded by a mass. This connection with the city was also part of the urban culture in which the convent played such an important role. Whatever happened in the cloister was part of the public life of the surrounding lay community. All voting nuns lined up to receive the prelate, two witnesses, and a notary, all members of the church, who verified the election. Sometimes his visit also served to inquire on the state of affairs in the convent, listen to any complaints, and exercise his authority in an attempt to solve any existing problems.¹⁷ The election itself was conducted in a ritual manner, with all nuns making their own choice through ballots that were counted until the majority stipulated by the Rules was attained. Then the prelate, witnesses, and notary certified the election, leaving the document in the nuns’ possession, and urging the community to obey the newly elected abbess. In some convents the election of the rest of the key administrative body (vicar and counselors) of the convent would take place immediately after the election of the abbess, also in the presence of the prelates.¹⁸

The danger of injecting human passions and politics in this election was real. Thus, to preserve its spiritual meaning, the possibility of “sin” was attached to the process if it was adulterated. Antonio Núñez, S.J. warned how one could sin by voting for the unworthy who may lead the community into difficulties and even distress, or siding with factions and creating discord not only at the time of the election but throughout the administration of the abbess. According to him, the most deserving candidate for abbess (*la más digna*) was she who was in her middle years, healthy, and ready to satisfy the needs of her subjects. She must know all the spiritual and material needs of the convent and must have experienced all the occupations that all nuns had to learn within the convent. Only those who had learned how to work and how to obey were entitled and fit to order. The talent for government was a collection of personal “gifts” that the community had to recognize almost intuitively. For her part, the model abbess must be able to discern the nature and character of her subjects; be patient and ready to suffer the burdens of the prelacy, such as criticisms from within; and have self-confidence in her judgment. She must also love her community with all her heart and look after its honor and public esteem.¹⁹

Núñez’s prescriptive for perfect electoral behavior and the message of obedience notwithstanding, the elections for abbesses created tensions and rivalries openly acknowledged by nuns and prelates as well. The election of the abbess unleashed a round of political activities that belied the presumed objectivity and even the “saintliness” of nuns’ behavior. It was axiomatic that in a closed community of women personal preferences, likes and dislikes, emotional attachments, as well as personal rancor would develop. While “running” for election is not the appropriate description of the process, as the time came nearer, nuns began to talk among themselves about the potential candidates. Privately exchanged comments served to assess the character of the members of the community with sufficient age and years of service to be considered for the position. Factions inevitably appeared, and the whispers became louder and more assertive. Each election gave occasion to pull strings for “favorite” candidates and for attempts to persuade other nuns to vote in support of one or the other. Sor María de Jesús Felipa, a black-veiled nun of the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia, recorded in her own personal spiritual diary the mounting suspense preceding the 1758 election for Mother Superior in her community. Nuns made bets among themselves on who could be elected; they compared their abilities, and talked about the “candidates” they liked or disliked, expressing fears about some and hopes about others.²⁰

Such personal interests extended to the prelates, who often advanced their own candidates. The Rules of the convents of Santa Inés and Santa Catalina de Sena, in Puebla, clearly stated that the prelate had the right to annul an election if he found the voting unsatisfactory by not having an obvious majority. He could also propose the names of four religious from which the community could choose one.²¹ The authority that a bishop could exercise in a conventual election was no idle talk. Puebla's Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, who engaged in a reform of the feminine Orders in the city, had no hesitation in taking personal interest in the election of those nuns whom he considered most prudent and observant to carry out the stricter rules he wanted to see the convents follow.²² Although many incidents of personal pressure remained unrecorded, several of them had repercussions beyond the cloisters, as detailed below and in Chapter 9. Nuns, as members of religious orders, were also vassals of the king, and as such they had the right to appeal to the highest of the civil courts, the Audiencia, and even the viceroy, whenever they felt undue pressure or abuse in any of the orders emanating from their religious superior. This right was known as *recurso de fuerza* and was used by nuns in several instances throughout the colonial period.

One example of how this right was exercised took place in the Franciscan convent of Santa Isabel, Mexico City. On October 12, 1716, Sor Gertrudis de San Pedro wrote a letter to the Franciscan Commissary General accusing Vicar Fr. Joseph Cillero of having stolen her election as abbess by committing fraud.²³ According to her, she obtained twenty-five votes out of forty-one, which gave her a clear victory, since it was over half of the total number. However, Fr. Joseph made the community take a second vote, refusing to declare how many she had received, which made her believe she had won again. A third round of votes was called by Fr. Joseph, but this time, she claimed, he openly asked the nuns to vote for Sor Luisa de San Antonio. The community was too afraid or too timid to do otherwise, and Sor Luisa was elected. She was elected again in 1720.²⁴ But if the first response to pressure was official acceptance, those involved did not accept their prelate's interference with the expected humility. Their defiance led to a stormy round of accusations and investigations that rattled the convent and brought the Archbishop of Mexico, José Lanciego y Eguilaz (1712–28), and the Viceroy of Mexico, Baltasar de Zúñiga, Marquis of Valero (1716–22), into the fray.²⁵ The Franciscan Order moved to depose Fr. Joseph and appointed a new Commissary and Vice-Commissary General. The internal politics of an election among women had important repercussions among the male hierarchy itself.

Archbishop Lanciego y Eguilaz, claiming a "paternal" interest, expressed his concern to the new Commissary General but, reported to the Audiencia that he had received no response whatsoever from the Franciscans. They saw his "paternal" interest more as a self-serving intrusion than a gesture of generosity.²⁶ The archbishops of Mexico had frequently shown a desire to win matches of authority against the regular Orders, and this case was not different from others. For their part, the nuns in Santa Isabel did not forget they were the central source of discord. The convent was in turmoil and the dissenting nuns expressed themselves by the only means available to them: making noise and calling on the episcopal authorities to protect them from their own prelates. Lanciego y Eguilaz depicted the situation as follows:

On that very same day of the appointment of a new Vice-Commissary and Commissary General trouble began in the convent of Santa Isabel, which was torn by disagreement. Three times they called their judge, the Vicar General, to help them, threatening to leave the convent if he would not come. The Vicar got in touch with the Viceroy, and made an agreement whereby the Viceroy would write the nuns giving them hope that they would receive help. The Viceroy did that and, in fact, he visited the convent and succeeded in calming the situation.²⁷

Fr. Joseph Cillero had his own version of the incident, which contradicted Sor Gertrudis, strongly suggesting that the "trouble" in Santa Isabel reflected a struggle for power within the convent as well as a test of his own male authority.²⁸ He rebutted Sor Gertrudis' accusation and declared that Sor Luisa de San Antonio was the canonically elected abbess, a fact ratified by her being in office for six months and witnessed by all the nuns in the convent. Sor Luisa was deeply involved in the politics of this case. On April 22, 1717, she wrote a letter to the Audiencia signed by twenty-one other nuns supporting Cillero who had been deposed, and denouncing their newly appointed prelate—Fr. Joseph Pedraza—as "an intruder" and not "their prelate." That was a daunting statement from women who had vowed obedience to their superiors. Manipulating their legal resources, they asked the Audiencia and the viceroy to have their own "true" prelates returned to them, and begged the archbishop to protect them. This last request was a crossing of jurisdictions that prelates of the regular Orders considered most threatening to their own authority and certainly one that would not endear the nuns to their Franciscan superiors. Further evidence that there was something really amiss between the Franciscan nuns and their male prelates comes in a letter dated April 16, 1717, from Abbess Nicolasa de Guadalupe de Santa Clara and fifty-six of her nuns, in which they begged the viceroy to have their "dear father" Cillero returned to them. Santa Clara was not the source of this turmoil, but they felt solidarity with some of their sisters at Santa Isabel.

These outspoken Franciscan nuns knew how to be heard and showed no inhibition in expressing their likes and dislikes. The election in their convent had ramifications involving the highest authorities of the vice kingdom pitting bands with opposite interests. The Audiencia, gathered as Real Acuerdo (with the presence of the viceroy), rejected petitions, Cillero's as well as the nuns', and declared the matter closed.²⁹ Apparently, this body wanted to wash its hands from this jurisdictional dispute. Records of canonical elections in Santa Isabel in the 1720s show that Sor Gertrudis de San Pedro was elected abbess in 1726 and that other elections in succeeding years posed no further problems.³⁰ This was not the first time that Franciscan nuns had problems of obedience with their prelates owing to dissatisfaction with their governance. The discharge of human passions at the time of canonical elections was not all that unusual. The communities of women could generate enough political pressure within to alter the expected routine of daily life in the capital city.

Archbishop Lanciego y Eguilaz, who had written a Pastoral Letter to the nuns of his diocese in 1716 recommending strict observance, was not immune to the same "sin" he had criticized in Fr. Joseph Cillero and the Franciscan Order.³¹ In 1723, Sor Juana María de San Esteban was elected abbess of the recently founded Carmelite convent of Santa Teresa la Nueva. The nuns were subjects of the archbishop. Throughout the seventeenth century, the first Carmelite convent of Santa Teresa, known as La Antigua, had attempted unsuccessfully to free itself from the episcopacy and return to the jurisdiction of their Order.³² In 1723, as customary, the abbess submitted the Table of Offices to the archbishop for his final approval. Lanciego y Eguilaz saw "problems" with her appointments for offices in the convent, and made some alterations, which Sor Juana María refused to accept, threatening to resign her position. A clash of wills had to occur when a female subject denied the ultimate authority of her prelate. Lanciego y Eguilaz, who had been dissatisfied with the observance of the Rule in the convent, deposed the abbess, appointing Sor María de Cristo in her place. Trying to keep the incident out of the public domain—the fear of "scandal" was real among nuns and their prelates—he ordered the matter to be kept in complete confidence.³³

Despite that directive, Sor Juana María signed some papers, as if she still was the abbess, an action the archbishop considered to be an intolerable act of rebellion; she claimed to have done so to keep public gossip at bay. A few days later, Lanciego y Eguilaz visited the convent again, and removed Sor Juana's María's veil. This was the ultimate affront to a nun, since the veil was the outward symbol of her marriage to God. Then, he banished her to Santa Teresa la Antigua, where she remained imprisoned for several years. The archbishop showed total lack of tolerance for disrespect to his orders. While in her conventual jail, the nun appealed her case to the civil authorities, to a papal delegate in Puebla, to the Audiencia, and to the Council of the Indies. She remained defiant, but the archbishop managed to exercise his influence and she was denied a review of her case. However, in 1727, the Council of the Indies asked the archbishop to forward the nun's case to them, a sure sign that they had questions about his behavior. Lanciego y Eguilaz died on January 25, 1728, and that same year Sor Juana María published her legal defense in which she exposed the intrusion of the archbishop in her election, and denied the validity of her replacement.³⁴ The case had reached the public realm with much embarrassment for the ecclesiastic authorities.

A new archbishop, Juan Antonio Vizarrón y Eguiarreta, arrived in Mexico City in December 1730. By March 1731, he had decided to remove Sor Juana María from the local scene by sending her and a companion to Caracas to become the founders of a new convent. She left in November of that year and spent between 1732 and 1735 in that city trying to found the new house. Lack of funds forced her to return to Mexico with several other founding nuns. They arrived in Mexico City on January 27, 1736, and returned to their own community amidst public expressions of joy and support. A cycle was completed. Time gave Sor Juana María de San Esteban the last say in this case, but the story of her treatment by Archbishop Lanciego y Eguilaz reveals that no matter how pious and loving a prelate may have felt about his "lambs," he could exercise his male canonical authority to make them do what he wished. While nuns could rule themselves, the male hierarchy was always above them, and there was no equivocating about who had the ability to inflict the most pain in case of a clash.

A prelate could appoint an abbess if an election failed. On February 21, 1749, the Vicar General of Nuns and his legal retinue visited the convent of La Concepción to elect a new abbess.³⁵ There were one hundred nuns in the convent at the time. In the first round, Sor Catarina Josefa de San Francisco obtained thirty-three votes and Sor Isabel de San Miguel forty-eight votes. The Rules demanded a two-thirds majority, so the prelate proceeded to a second round and a third round without a clear majority for any candidate. At that point the vicar decided to name as abbess Sor Catarina Josefa de San Francisco. The logic behind his choice was clear. Hers was the only name surviving the three rounds. Sor Isabel de San Miguel was the obvious loser, having had nearly half of the community's votes in the first round but losing them to new "candidates" in the following two. The community had a reserve of leadership ready to materialize at opportune moments. Shifts were maneuvered swiftly among the nuns, although we do not know how they took place.

Pressure over elections remained a problem throughout the eighteenth century, as shown in the Franciscan convent of Santa Clara, Mexico City, in 1799.³⁶ The Franciscan provincial Fr. José Joaquín de Oyarzabal explained the appointment of the abbess as his choice and right. Indeed, in a consultation dating back to 1590, and having the weight of antiquity, the Franciscan Order had clearly established that the Provincial had the power to depose the abbess in case of incompetence or unruliness.³⁷ Fr. José Joaquín encouraged the sisters in Santa Clara to be humble, and submit to the orders of their superiors and to Divine Providence.³⁸ Margaret Chowning has found that engineering the process of elections in the conceptionist convent of La Purísima Concepción, in San Miguel el Grande, was more than a distinct possibility.³⁹

Beyond the politics of election, once the process was over the responsibilities of an abbess were broad. She was in charge of overseeing the budget and keeping expenses under control. In carrying out those duties, she was liable to be criticized by the community itself and by the accountants who supervised the convent's account books. In 1617, Sor Isabel de la Concepción was the abbess of the convent of Jesús María in Mexico City. On reviewing the accounts the diocesan authorities deemed she had spent too much on flour, but she claimed that the convent had been cheated in the weight by their purveyor. Trying to fix the problem, she decided that nuns should receive less bread. This provoked a series of invectives and accusations from the community. As she put it, "the house was on fire, and they cursed me and caused uneasiness saying that they were dying of hunger. Thus I tried to help their needs by adding some bread." The prelates tried to make Sor Isabel pay from her own pocket for the additional expenses incurred for the bread, and aroused her vehement protest. She argued that what she was doing made the life of her nuns a bit more comfortable despite their "extreme poverty."⁴⁰ The convent was experiencing times of penury. She blamed the previous "officers" (*oficialas*) for the situation, especially Sor Inés de la Cruz, who had left the convent to found the Carmelites of San José. The administration of the convent's moneys was a heavy responsibility that abbesses shouldered, but for which they had no real-life preparation prior to professing.

The abbess was also responsible for establishing a close working relationship with the majordomos or administrators, who collected money from their properties and disbursed them to the abbess for conventual needs. Some abbesses showed a very good understanding of the administration of their convents, a fact notable for a period in which women were presumed to have soft brains and little capacity for intellectual tasks. Margarita de la Concepción, Abbess of San Juan de la Penitencia, in an undated letter (possibly mid-seventeenth century) to the Archbishop of Mexico, reports how their administrator was too busy with the diocese's affairs to inform her and her governing council about the collection of rents from their rental properties, the interests yielded from the money on liens and loans, and the physical condition of their properties. Being in dire need of someone who would straighten out their accounts, she suggested the appointment of two men of substantive means, who had daughters in the convent, to take care of its administration. As it behooved her, Sor Margarita was simply trying to take control of her house.⁴¹

The abbess had a significant degree of autonomy in determining who would serve in the governance of the convent. A large convent such as Santa Clara of Puebla employed a large number of nuns to perform the many required services. In smaller convents a single nun could be assigned to one or multiple tasks, as the need demanded. Santa Clara of Puebla could afford to employ six nuns in charge of the torno or revolving window by which all merchandise entered the convent. It also had three accountants, three nurses in the infirmary, and five sisters in charge of the contact between the convent and the outside world.⁴² Santa Isabel in Mexico City had thirty-one nuns performing eighteen different tasks. They obviously engaged in multiple tasks because the convent listed three sister accountants and three sacristans in charge of maintaining the objects of worship in the best of condition.⁴³ Corpus Christi for Indians, with a fixed number of twenty-one nuns, occupied all of them in different conventual tasks.⁴⁴ Their appointments ran for a period of three years, after which time each nun was appointed to a different task. In theory, this not only enabled them to learn how best to manage the convent, but it also helped them to discover their own "abilities" for some occupations. In practical terms, the organization of the community in well-defined tasks was essential to ensure its services and order. Of course, cases of utter ineptitude were not infrequent. Ultimately, however, the spiritual meaning of serving in the occupations was the service of God. The performance of any task was always dedicated to the greater glory of God, and if suffering or inadequacy resulted, this was understood as his desire to test the mettle of the nun and the convent.

THE COMMUNITY AT WORK

The hierarchy of functionaries who contributed to a convent's operation was complex. The *vicaria* was "the right hand of the abbess."⁴⁵ She was an established member of the community who was capable of being an abbess and who could replace the abbess in case of death or deposition. In fact, some ex-abbesses became vicarias of the newly elected abbess. The counselors or *definidoras* were a council of elderly nuns who, with the vicaria, formed a council of advisors and confidants to the abbess. Only the most experienced and mature nuns were councilors. Along with the vicaria they signed most of the convent's documents.

The *portera mayor* and her assistants were in charge of the *portería* or concierge, the conventual space which was called the lungs of the convent because of the exchange of "air" between the inner and the outside worlds. A room of various dimensions, it was opened several hours in the morning and in the afternoon to allow the necessary contact between the cloistered and those outside. All sorts of persons would be seen in the *portería*: lawyers for the convent, confessors, vendors, family members, men and women who ran errands for the convent, and private visitors and friends of the nuns, in addition to relatives. The *locutorios* were the places where the nuns could talk to visitors and confessors. Given the heterogeneous nature of visitors and their business, one or several nuns had to control the flow of persons and regulate who could be received and by whom. Because of the danger posed by the contact with the outside world, the *escuchas* (listeners) stood discreetly close to the nuns and their visitors and ensured that nothing untoward or offensive to the religious condition of the nuns was said or done. In San Jerónimo and San Lorenzo there was a *correctora de confesionario*, whose duties were to announce the arrival of confessors and to remain vigilant so that the confession took place in an "ordered manner."⁴⁶

Another physical opening to the world was the *torno*, the revolving apparatus that, like a lazy susan, allowed the introduction of goods, letters, documents, and other small items into the convent, especially when the *portería* was closed. The *tornera* controlled access to the *torno*. In San Jerónimo of Mexico City, there were three *torneras*, but only the *tornera mayor*—the oldest—could open this device. The *porteras*' and *torneras*' most important role was to police and exercise vigilance to preserve and uphold the quality of the cloister's assumed isolation and sacredness. The *sacristanas* and vicarias regulated the ceremonial rituals of worship. The cleanliness and good condition of the many utensils required for mass, and the upkeep of the altars were the special care of the *sacristana*. The vicarias, not to be confused with the advisor to the abbess, were in charge of ceremonial correctness and order throughout the year, and also oversaw the daily prayers. They could be helped by a *correctora del oficio divino*, who looked after the *coros* where the nuns gathered to follow Mass and conduct their prayers. The teacher of novices (*maestra de novicias*) assumed the responsibility of training the aspirant in doctrine and religious discipline to prepare her for her final profession.⁴⁷

To make the convent work effectively as a community, other offices less concerned with discipline and religious propriety tended to the material needs of the inhabitants. The *refitolera* was in charge of the cleanliness of the refectory, the tableware, and the ordering of the servants who helped during communal meal time. The *depositaria* was in charge of administering the moneys belonging to the nuns, whether for private use or for spending in conventual needs. In larger convents there were several of them, each holding a key to the convent's coffer. The *provisora* in San Jerónimo probably carried out similar tasks. She held the strings of the purse for petty cash for each and all of the nuns' needs. She was called *procuradora* in the convent of Santa Rosa, Puebla, and provided for the meals for the community on a daily basis. In large convents tasks multiplied. The *roperas* were in charge of the washing of the nuns' habits.⁴⁸ The teacher of servants (*maestra de mozas*) was responsible for teaching the basics of religious knowledge to the conventual servants—whether communal or private—as well as their proper behavior. The *obreras* were in charge of overseeing the workers whenever there was any architectural work in the convent. The *celadora* closed the doors of the sleeping quarters and ensured the absolute silence of the convent. Finally, the nurses (*enfermeras*) took care of the sick in the infirmary. This task was also subject to rotation in most communities. Nurses had to look after the provision of medicines, bed linens, and the cleanliness of the place. They consulted the physician who rendered services to the nunnery and the pharmacist who supplied medicines. In some convents there was also a *boticaria* (pharmacist) who supplied the medicines for the sick.

The many servants who lived in the convent helped the white-veiled nuns in performing the tasks assigned to them. While above the servants in rank, white-veiled nuns helped to sweep, clean the kitchen after meals, close windows at night, carry water for the fountains to each room, and tend the backyard fowl and vegetable gardens that some convents kept to provide food for the nuns. A significantly different situation prevailed in the discalced communities of more rigorous observance. There, the number of servants was limited by their Rules and the many services rendered by the sisters to the convent were regarded as part of their discipline and religious observance. For example, in the convent of Santa Rosa in Puebla, a discalced Dominican nunnery, each one of the nuns had to cook on a weekly basis.⁴⁹ The exercise of such humble tasks was an essential element of discalced nunneries. In the seventeenth century, some convents baked their own bread with the help of bakers (*panaderas*).

As stated before, one of the most demanding tasks performed by nuns was that of keeping the books, for which they rarely had any preparation or experience before they entered the house. Nuns who occupied that office demonstrated abilities that few outsiders recognized. The most cursory review of the books of any convent show the patience, care, and attention required from the nun accountants. They had to prepare neatly written books for the prelates' inspection, and reconcile them with those kept by the administrator or majordomo. Failing this, either the majordomo or the nuns had to pay for any difference. Learning by doing explains why sometimes nunneries had problems in keeping expenses within reasonable boundaries, and why so much care and keenness was put into the task by the nuns in charge. After reviewing hundreds of account books, I have come to the conclusion that by the middle of the seventeenth century, most nunneries kept books with a reasonable degree of competence and aptitude. Some exceptional accountants shone in the eyes of their prelates, owing to the innate capacity to deal with the accounts.⁵⁰ In fact, they were often capable of sorting out the complexities of old and neglected deeds that administrators had overlooked or forgotten. For example, in 1779, the abbess and councilors of La Concepción, in Mexico City, received permission to readjust the payment of several pious deeds that had been defaulted because their original founding capital had been partially lost. After refusing any help from their administrator, they took under their own care the convent's old books and legal papers, and traced down the reasons for the lack of payments; they were confident they could use the standing amount to pay for the pious deeds (chantries, help for orphans and other nuns, and masses for several souls).⁵¹

It is rare to find a nun who wrote about her experience as a self-trained accountant. One who did was Sor Inés de la Cruz, a nun in the convent of Jesús María, and one of the founders of San José, the first Carmelite convent of Mexico. As a novice in Jesús María she learned that the convent was near bankruptcy owing to embezzlement by the majordomo, who swindled the proceeds of four dowries—possibly near 10,000 pesos.⁵² Sor Inés, a migrant from Spain, tells how she had learned some accounting from her father at home, although it was "not business accounting." She offered her services to the nuns, who were very happy to accept.

"They called," she writes, "a man who would teach me how to understand the income derived from liens, and after this they gave me a basket full of entangled papers and the account books they had in the convent, all removed from the majordomo. They [the accounts] had no rhyme or reason; some were lost, and some were mixed with the legal deeds of other convents, and they did not know what they owed or what they had paid."⁵³

When she realized how much work she had, she thought she would die “as penitence for her sins.” However, she was determined to do all she could “because it is my condition to do things well or not to do them at all.” She created new books, straightened the accounts, and determined that instead of a majordomo, the convent should appoint a “collector” of rents and interests, who would convey the money he collected directly to the convent. She tells how God had provided a good man who carried out the job well while she performed her duties as an accountant.⁵⁴ She carried out all business in the parlor (locutorio), and after she finished she went for prayers in the coro, and from there to the room where nuns did some manual work (*sala de labor*). In other words, she did not neglect any of her duties as a professed novice while assuming the extra burden of bookkeeping, for which “the favor of God and patience were greatly needed.”⁵⁵ Further, she claimed that her novitiate teacher did not have any regard for her work as an accountant and punished her if she missed some of her other duties. Sor Inés remained as an accountant for many years. In that task she never denied the nuns anything for their upkeep, especially the sick nuns, to whom she gave with open hands; while begging them to keep the secret of her generosity.⁵⁶ She mixed efficiency and adroitness with a human element of compassion.

Not all sister accountants were as efficient, patient, or knowledgeable as Sor Inés. The disarray of many conventual archives led to the loss of deeds and therefore income. This was not always the fault of the nuns; sometimes the majordomos they hired to collect their income and disburse moneys for key expenses were to blame. At times, it seemed that the only solution for this situation was to pray for help. In some cases, prayers worked. The biography of the well-known Pueblan bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz includes a case of the loss of a legal deed for a chantry in favor of the convent of Santa Clara.⁵⁷ Sor María de San Diego, the bookkeeper in charge, shines in the narrative as a committed and responsible accountant who, having given up hopes of ever recovering the deed, commended the case to the bishop. Miraculously, the document was found. The bishop gained in stature among the believers, but disentangling conventual accounts and records required more than “miracles” to keep in order.

The management of the income of any given convent demanded the constant attention of not just the accountant but of the abbess, the conventual vicaria, and the counseling mothers, who were supposed to check all the expenses incurred by the majordomo in either construction or repair of properties, management of rural properties, and payment of rents and liens due to the convent.⁵⁸ An impressive case was that of La Encarnación, of Mexico City, which by the mid-eighteenth century had developed a streamlined and exceptionally efficient accounting system for itself, earning the praise of the archbishopric.⁵⁹ La Encarnación’s bookkeeping and administrative skills are recorded in an epistolary exchange between the nuns and Archbishop Manuel Rubio Salinas (1749–65), who took a keen interest in the administration of conventual incomes. Midway through his episcopacy, he wrote a letter addressed to all women’s convents delineating the duties and responsibilities of majordomos in collecting rents and rendering accounts of the repairs of conventual properties.⁶⁰ In response, the nuns informed him on how they had addressed the problems of investment and accounting.

One of those responding was Abbess Eusebia María de San Antonio. In May 1755, she instructed her community on how to keep the books, how to deal with the majordomo, and how to keep receipts of all transactions. For her the most important guideline was to keep separate books for all expenditures and to record every operation as soon as it occurred. Sister accountants should never advance anything to those men in their service or spend money on a feast until the funds were in hand. To help maintain the convent free of financial troubles, they should always demand a notarial affidavit of all transactions and books, and separate new from old accounts books. To preserve Sor Eusebia María’s advice “for posterity” and teach oncoming accountants, Sor María Micaela de la Santísima Trinidad had written a “method” for profitable investments. She noted that orderly bookkeeping and complete accountability of all expenses were the pillars of Sor Eusebia’s system. The majordomo should be a man of means, God-fearing, and dedicated to the convent’s interests. He should be obliged to submit weekly accounts of moneys collected and to be properly backed by financially solvent guarantors. She gave precise advice on the best investments for the convent. For example, rental houses should be located in good neighborhoods, and their purchase should be guided by their yield, not their stated value. Location was also important for granting liens on real estate, because if they failed to be repaid, the convent could acquire the property. Here she was bargaining on default and acquisition of houses by litigation.

Sor María Micaela did not advise investment on land close to Mexico City. Its value was always inflated, and if the owners defaulted payment on their many liens, legal action to recover the invested money was difficult and protracted.⁶¹ Only after the most diligent investigations of ownership and guarantors should the convent risk money on such properties. The most secure investments were loans to merchants of known credit and means. When loans became due, she advised the majordomo to begin vigorous action to recover them. The matter-of-fact wisdom and astuteness shown by the nuns of La Encarnación on financial matters were the result of many years of practical experience and knowledge transmitted orally from nun to nun as part of conventual culture. The desire for order, and the preservation of knowledge, in Sor Eusebia’s and María Micaela’s work points to an eighteenth-century love for clarity and discipline. They achieved excellence in recordkeeping and financial wisdom, proving that women could be as good as, or even better in this task than, male administrators.

CEREMONIES

If internal organization and hierarchical discipline were essential to conventual life, so were ceremonies that injected meaning into the routine performance of daily life. While it is true that there was hardly anything “drab” in the colorful mingling of peoples in large Conceptionist or Franciscan convents, the repetition of the same activities year after year could blunt the sense of wonderment that sustained religious life. One could argue that hagiography filled in part the need to connect the natural world with another in which all marvels were possible, but reading was not the only source of spiritual nourishment. More immediate sources were the ceremonial spectacles mounted by the convents for all special occasions, which reflected the love for secular ceremonies in baroque New Spain and refreshed daily routines. People loved the color, music, and the pomp that processions, viceregal receptions, and even autos-da-fé injected into daily life.⁶² The professions of novices and nuns, described in Chapter 1, brought the entire secular community to the conventual churches and gave the cloistered women the excitement of the unusual. Music, the buzzing of a church filled with family and curious onlookers, and fireworks at night endowed those occasions with the thrills of worldliness, but they were essential to give grandeur and public respect to the church, satisfaction to the nun’s family, and spiritual inspiration to the professant. Equally, the ceremonies surrounding death and burial—as described in Chapter 5—gathered the community in the final farewell to the sister who, according to belief, was on her way to meet her maker and husband.

Other ceremonies, perhaps less dramatic, but equally demanding, filled the cloisters’ routines with expectation and diverted the nuns from their normal routine of meals and prayers. According to Rosalva Loreto, the liturgical calendar of the convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla, a typical Conceptionist convent, had twenty-seven different feasts. Lent, Christmas, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and Corpus Christi were major celebrations, but the feasts of Saint Paul and Saint Peter, Saint Jerome, and Saint James the Apostle, along with many others special to each convent, filled the year with preparations, ritual, and expenses.⁶³ These feasts were celebrated publicly with masses, and in the intimacy of the cloister with processions in which all the sisters participated. The conventual processions were headed by a nun who carried the oil and the holy water that she

dispersed with the hyssop. She was followed by others with lighted candles and the sacristana holding a crucifix that faced the procession. Nuns sang and followed an established path, with the abbess closing the ranks.⁶⁴ Significant here is the role that the nuns appropriated from the men: blessing the cloisters with holy water. This protagonist role within the convent was a special venue of authority for women in the religious community. Only their marriage to Christ could endow them with that kind of authority, which made up for some of the confrontations they had with their prelates in other matters.

An early-eighteenth-century ceremonial book of an unnamed convent offers a rare view of the complex rituals that were performed within the convent for unusual occasions. The convent is possibly of the Conceptionist Order in Mexico City, because the festivities prescribed for the day of the Conception would only have meaning in nunneries of that Order.⁶⁵ As all the convents were involved in many ceremonial activities and had to put on a good *mise-en-scène*, all nuns had to learn the rituals by heart as part of their training. There was, unquestionably, a strong undercurrent of theatricality in each ceremony. All gestures and movements had meaningful messages of respect, submission, and spirituality.

The ceremonial occasion for the reception of the archbishop was perhaps the most demanding. For a convent a visit from the highest spiritual authority was imbued with awe, and the attention to details was mandatory. The bells rang as the conventual chaplains and the majordomo waited for him, attired with hats and capes. The visit of an archbishop or a bishop to a nunnery was infrequent, but thorough. Prelates tried to visit each of the convents under their jurisdiction at least once during their diocesan rule. On most other occasions they were substituted for by the Vicar of Nuns, but the ceremonial followed the same steps. A carpet was laid at the door of the church and a small portable altar, duly dressed up with hangings and tablecloth, canopy, and a cross, were placed on the main altar. The main chaplain received him at the doorway in the company of other chaplains, and after kissing the prelate's hands gave him the hyssop, which he had also kissed. The archbishop knelt and he received three incense sways. After kissing the cross, they all proceeded to the main altar where the prelate kissed the cross again, while the community of nuns sang and the organ played. After a welcome in Latin, the bishop blessed the people in the church and then he proceeded to explain the purpose of his visit.

During a regular inspection visit, the archbishop entered the parlor (*portería*) that was cleaned and fixed with the "utmost decency." All nuns lined up to receive him wearing their full habits and carrying candles. They kissed his hand and knelt before him as an act of obeisance. Then he went into the *coro*, where a special sitting area was prepared for him with carpets, pillows, and "all the decency demanded by the visit." In his preelection visit to San Lorenzo in 1729, Vicar Visitor Luna noted the "very rich custody, decorated with diamonds and precious stones" and found everything in the cloisters very clean and "very decent."⁶⁶ Decency meant the decorum paid to the person through the material ornaments and etiquette displayed for his enjoyment. Refreshments were served while nuns sang a *Te Deum Laudamus* and played the organ. Music was a key part of all ceremonies and thus it was important to have nuns who could play instruments and sing. Once the archbishop or prelate was ready to depart, the nuns accompanied him to the door with lighted candles.

The election of the abbess and her main officials in the convent, reviewed earlier in this chapter, called for a complex ceremonial. The archbishop or bishop was informed of the need to elect a new abbess fifteen days before the end of her term, and asked him to absolve her of her duties and all the errors committed during her term, and conduct a new election. The very style of her letter followed traditional wording, as was the case for the notarization of the act of election. As we have seen, the archbishop or bishop did not always attend the election. For the regular Orders, if the Father Provincial or General Commissary could not attend he was also replaced by a distinguished member of the Church or the Order. "Secret" visits to hear reports and complaints about observance and conventual affairs could precede the election. For that occasion the prelate had a list of all voting nuns and each one, in order of age precedence, talked to him personally for the prescribed "confession" or report on conventual affairs.

On election day, bells rang and the schedule of community prayers were changed to accommodate the event. The prelate was received by the chaplains and was accompanied to a well-lit and well-decorated main altar. On that occasion the chaplain conducted a Mass for the Holy Spirit. There was a ceremonial "visit" to the Tabernacle, which the prelate opened to public view, along with the different altars, the confessionals, and the sacristy, to confirm that everything pertaining to the worship was in order. The altar's and the prelates' ornaments were changed from white to black in order to pray for the deceased bishops, the patrons, and the nuns. After this, the prelate removed all black ornaments and knelt, singing the *Veni Creator* hymn. All the community knelt throughout this part of the ceremony, and then it went to the *coro* to proceed with the election. The prelate and his retinue were seated outside the *coro* on the ground floor, from where they conducted the event. He would have a table, lights, paper, a cushion for his feet, and chairs for him and his companions. The Rules of the convent were read and the prelate exhorted the community to act with wisdom. The nuns voted through an opening in the wall. All votes were double-checked. Once the election was finished, all papers were burned and a bell was rung to indicate that the curtains covering the *coro* should be lifted. The newly elected abbess was called by the prelate and asked to accept her charge. While a *Te Deum* was sung, the new abbess, seated in the middle of the *coro*, received an obeisance kiss in her hand from all the nuns in order of antiquity. According to the ceremonial manual, the prelate and his retinue could visit the cloister to inspect all the communal rooms, and receive a refreshment "with all the religiosity and veneration possible."⁶⁷

The ceremony for the confirmation and reception of the new conventual officers was internal, but it followed a similar tightly regulated ritual. The new and the old abbess, the vicaria, and the council mothers met to assign the occupations of each nun. This Table of Offices was sent to the prelate for his final approval. Disapproval was a possibility, as illustrated by the encounter between Archbishop Lanciego y Eguilaz and Mother Juana María de San Esteban. Assuming this was not the case, the archbishop's secretary brought the confirmation back to the convent. He was received by the new abbess and all the community. The secretary read the list and passed it to the sacristana. A *Te Deum* was sung, and the abbess took the new vicaria by the hand and made her sit. The former vicaria placed a veil on her head and paid her respect, kneeling. The vicaria was second in command and this ceremony served to reinforce her authority. All the community repeated the ceremonial kissing and kneeling. On the following days the community went to the *coro* and the new officers received their posts from their predecessors, who would "instruct them" in their duties, a rather metaphorical gesture since they all knew what to do. Novices received their new teacher, and all offices were exchanged in order of antiquity while the bells rung. The sound of bells notified the city of the internal goings on.

The death of a prelate, the spiritual father of the community, also called for special ceremonies. A Requiem Mass was said on the day of his death. For nine days after the burial the bells pealed for his soul. The parlors and all public places were closed. Candles were only lit for the necessary masses, while only the victuals necessary for eating entered the convent. A similar procedure was followed after the death of the vicar. These carefully choreographed sets of ritual ceremonies solemnized the most important occasions for communal observance and reaffirmed their importance and gravity. The community renewed its personal bonds every time it went through them. As well, the ceremonies were expressions of spirituality essential to strengthening the faith of the people in seventeenth-century Catholicism.

After the Council of Trent, ceremonies became more complex and more essential in their task of conveying spiritual meaning.⁶⁸ The liturgical calendar provided many special solemn occasions for spiritual renewal and inspirational guidance, with Lent and Advent remaining the most important events in a convent's life. For those occasions, nunneries often had a preacher give them spiritual talks (*pláticas espirituales*) that would give them food for thought, strengthen their vocation, and eulogize their choice of life.⁶⁹ The preacher talked to them in the afternoon from the church and outside the lower coro, while the community sat within its cloister listening attentively. Anonymous drafts of such religious talks to be delivered at the convent of Santa Inés in Mexico illustrate the nature of these inspirational teachings. In one of them, the preacher's main theme was Solomon's strong woman, who, he stated, was like the brides of Christ, the repositories of the four key virtues of contemplative life: prudence, justice, strength, and temperance. These virtues were precious stones in a nun's crown. The assumption was that sisters had entered the convent to increase their own treasure of virtues, and the advent of Christ's birth was a special time to think about them insofar as it was the first of two comings: the second would be the Final Judgment. The sweetness of Jesus in his manger would be followed by the stern view of a God reviewing their deeds at the second coming. As explained in simple language, these virtues allowed control over oneself and propitiated harmony. The bride of Christ would let her soul govern the "small world of her body" and be charitable to others. Using the coming of the three kings with their offerings, he compared their gifts to the virtues of religious life. Gold was charity and love; incense was prayer; and myrrh, the bitterness of mortification. These inspirational teachings can be dated back to the sixteenth century. Inés de la Cruz, while at Jesús María, arranged for Dominican Fr. Gerónimo de Araujo to talk at the convent. He became confessor to several nuns and established a spiritual friendship with her.⁷⁰

During the Holy Week, convents centered on the celebration of the most sacred feast in Christianity, the death of Christ to redeem humanity, with a series of solemn masses officiated by guest preachers. A 1645 receipt of expenses for the Holy Week from the convent of La Concepción in Mexico City itemized the cost of supporting that most solemn of observances.⁷¹ It required the participation of special preachers who delivered sermons on the themes of the Passion. Struggling with a weak economy, La Concepción paid them only 50 pesos, while in the past they had received as much as 100 pesos. On Palm Sunday the church was decorated with the classic palm leaves at the cost of 45 pesos. Jesuit fathers preached on Wednesday and gave talks on Friday in addition to administering confession. These services demanded the offering of a light meal or snack, for which the accountant of the convent charged 120 pesos for sugar and flour (possibly for sweets) and 12 pesos for the cost of the chocolate offered on both occasions. On Maundy Thursday a special meal was prepared for those who took care of the convent and its church. This meal, as those quoted before, must have been sumptuous, because it cost 50 pesos. Food was an expression of institutional hospitality and encouraged the development of exuberant culinary arts in Mexico. The kitchen was a central place in the convent, and the preparation of food transcended the mere feeding of the religious to where expected etiquette connotations were part of conventual ceremonies. All the attention paid to feeding the prelates was extended to the individual preparation of food for favorite confessors, not just part of the etiquette of courtesy, but of the bonding that religious women practiced with the men who fed them spiritual guidance and exercised the ultimate authority in their hierarchical world.

During the Holy Week, a "monument" or temporary altar was set up and lighted with hundreds of candles.⁷² The temporary altar set up for La Concepción in 1645 cost the nunnery 60 pesos. A gang of Indian workers took the temporary altar out of storage, cleaned it, and set it up. They also put it back after the week was over. Seven arrobas of wax (135 pounds) and two arrobas of "*bujia*," special wax candles, were purchased to decorate it. During that week the penitents of the confraternity of the Holy Burial (*Santo Entierro*) visited the church and received sweets and wine refreshments.⁷³ The confraternity held two solemn processions on Thursday and Friday. Four divine offices were performed during those two days by specially invited preachers. The convent reserved 80 pesos to pay them and allotted 20 pesos for their chocolate. Their own conventual chaplains received 20 pesos, and a similar sum was distributed among the nuns who sang in the offices. This latter payment was not unusual. The nuns who performed special services received tips or bonuses as charitable gratuities in the spirit of agape. They were very much appreciated by the recipients, some of whom had entered the convents under special arrangement to perform those services in exchange for a reduction in their dowry. While none of the spirituality of that week can be gleaned from the expense receipts, the prescribed ceremonial indicates that the solemnity of the observance was punctuated by food consumption and entailed a significant discharge of money for the convent. The total expense for La Concepción was 463 pesos.⁷⁴

The preachers' *pláticas* were paid with so-called *limosnas* or gratuities that consumed a fair amount of money. In 1656, San Bernardo paid Father Alonso de Medina, a Jesuit, and Father Baltasar de Dorante 50 pesos each for the Lent sermons, although one Father Collante only received 16 pesos for a *plática* sermon during that period, suggesting a ranking of payment among the preachers. The sermon delivered on the feast of San Bernardo cost 24 pesos one year, but 30 pesos in another. Other priests received smaller gifts of money—between 20 and 28 pesos—whenever they came to celebrate the feasts of the patron saints or give spiritual talks. The feasts that mattered most to this convent, beyond the observance of Advent, were the feast of their patron saint, the feast of Our Lady of the *Buen Suceso* (of the Good Event), the feast of Saint Joseph, and the feast of the Incarnation. For such celebrations they purchased fireworks and flowers and also took the opportunity to replace religious items that were worn out. In 1654 San Bernardo bought materials for a new chasuble. Even though the fabric had been a gift, they spent more than 158 pesos buying other pieces of cloth, as well as candlesticks, a canopy, and an ornamental pot for the church.⁷⁵

Ceremonials remained important and expensive in the eighteenth century. A general itemization of the expenses of all convents carried out in 1744 reveals how important the feasts of the patron saints and those of canonical significance were for them. Regardless of their size or wealth, they spent hundreds of pesos in the celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi, Holy Week, Christmas, and numerous patron saints. Holy Week cost 300 pesos at Corpus Christi and 350 pesos at Santa Catalina de Sena, while San Lorenzo spent 204 pesos. This latter convent spent 1,739 pesos in the feasts of the Incarnation, the patron saint, Advent sermons, and ornaments for that calendar year.⁷⁶

Daily life in any convent was a complex composite of spiritual messages wrapped in ceremonies and rituals. The basic assumption that order was essential to carry out religious life translated itself into precise allocations of time and expenses, and allocation of personal and communal labor, which held the community together. Order, obedience, and discipline had spiritual significance, a point that confessors stressed as essential to the education of a nun in her state. They were elements necessary to shape and regulate the complex systems of social relations that developed in the cloister. As a corporate society the convent permitted nuns to exercise power and impress authority among themselves, sustaining one of the few forms of self-government women enjoyed. However, convents were part of a wide network of religious institutions, and the church was ruled by men, not by women. As such, the element of autonomy characteristic of conventual life had its limitations. A nunnery had a life of its own and self-government, but the degree of freedom from the rule of men was limited insofar as a male hierarchy oversaw its activities and also held the key to its spiritual life. This double system of government, interior for themselves and exterior as dependence on their prelates, was liable to generate clashes, some of which were among the women themselves, in which case they expressed a struggle for power. When they involved the men who ruled them, these clashes took a gendered nature.⁷⁷ Beyond those problems of governance that have been registered in history there must have been many others that went unrecorded, small or

petty enough to be buffered by conciliatory mediation and acts of contrition and repentance. The examples of confrontations and political maneuvering recorded in this chapter should serve as reminders that there were many meanings and consequences to the many events taking place within the cloister, a small and dense society that did not escape the intrigues of human affairs. And yet, all these worldly motivations were enveloped in a rich ceremonial life that demanded the energies and attention of all its members in their exacting detail and their emblematic spiritual meaning for the community. Spiritual and material blended seamlessly in conventual life. The next chapter will look more deeply into the activities carried out in the communities, which were so essential in keeping them working smoothly and sometimes so apparently far removed from their spiritual goals. In a convent, however, the interaction between the sacred and the profane was a permanent reality.

CHAPTER FIVE

Daily Life in the Convent

“The cloister is an aggregation of diverse characters, a union of different natures. Some boast their nobility; others think of themselves as discreet; some presume of being rich; others make ostentation of being poor; quite a few want to boss everything; others whose palates are so insipid who gossip against everything that is not up to their taste. And there are also some of natures so jealous that they insist in correcting all that is not their business to mend.”



Convents were populated by a mixture of women whose personalities and activities gave them a unique character. Although each cloister was a world in itself, convents were also part of their cities and not monuments to isolation and spirituality alone. The urban environment in which they were located provided all the vital elements for their survival. The doors that received novices and higher authorities did not open frequently to others. However, each convent had spaces dedicated to engagement in the necessary meetings with the outside world (el siglo). Family, administrators, confessors, vendors, aspirants to profession, patrons and friends, as well as members of the male religious hierarchy to whom they were accountable gathered in the conventual parlor or concierge (portería) on a daily basis, bringing news, goods, legal deeds, and money, all of which were essential to the convent.

The portería was largely a place of trade and business, and it was aptly described as the lungs of the convent, where the cloister met with the outside. The hours of trade were regulated to two each in the morning and the afternoon, although regulations were often broken, especially in the nondiscalced convents. Among the people gathering at the portería were tradesmen who supplied merchandise ranging from cloth for habits to candles for the altars. They could also be there to demand delinquent payment for supplies they had provided. Lawyers brought legal documents for suits, while majordomos paid their respects to the accountant mothers, brought payments from rentals, and reported on paid or extant debts and loans and other financial business. Wholesale merchants or their representatives would seek loans when money was available in the coffers, while beggars or poor visitors sought handouts. Servants could leave the convent for special tasks while young males hired for errands waited to render their services. Only during the most sacred days of Lent and Holy Week would such activities diminish.

Locutorios (parlors) were places to receive visitors and confessors exclusively. They were also called *rejas* because of the grille separating visitors from nuns. They seemed to have gained a life of their own in the seventeenth century, a fact not necessarily approved by male ecclesiastical authorities. Frequent advice from the prelates to restrict the number of visitors suggests an excessive and usual number of persons in the locutorio and a “relaxation” of the vow of enclosure that some regarded as intolerable. The Franciscan hierarchy, persistent in its intent to restrict the activities in the locutorios, engaged in a reforming drive in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The Father Provincials cited too many visits and even the performance of music, and quoted information on how some nuns even dared to use the lower coro, contiguous to the nave of the church, to talk to people who were there presumably for prayers. In some instances they begged for donations, a totally improper activity for such sacred places. The sacristy was also being used for communications with people outside.¹

Such misuse of sacred spaces moved Franciscan prelate after prelate to issue orders to reduce visitors to relatives only, prohibit conversations with men, and even report visits of small boys inside the cloister. One of them censured the purchase of merchandise by the nuns, calling those engaging in that traffic vulgar traders (*mercachifles*) and those men who sold them merchandise “drones.” Any sister in need of anything for her wardrobe, said one prelate, should address her needs to the abbess. He was appalled by the fact that nuns borrowed silver ornaments from friends or relatives for the ceremonies of profession or election, and when they lost the ornaments, they caused much embarrassment to the community. They also borrowed money from persons outside the cloister, as some post-mortem inventories of their cells revealed.² Seeking to curtail such activities, the prelate advised the use of copper or pewterware, which was more in tune with their vow of poverty. He also issued orders to enforce the closure of all spaces of public access at the prescribed hour, charging the abbesses to enforce the prohibition and maintain the expected respect for their chosen state. To those convents with limited resources, prelates recommended that they avoid superfluous expenses such as fireworks on feast days.

This long list of complaints and attempts to correct “bad habits” among Franciscan nuns is a sample of activities that had become “customary” among them, and suggest their occurrence in convents of other Orders. Late-seventeenth-century prelates were men intent on reorganizing the female domestic world of the nunneries, breaking into their most private spaces and imposing their own understanding of “order.” Because nuns were intolerant of such intrusions into “their” world, there was a constant tension between them and their prelates on the need to communicate and engage with the world. The multiplicity of personal motivations for contact with the outside were inevitable, and some could not be curtailed. For example, vicereines had a special prerogative to visit the cloisters, and they used it. Visiting the cloisters was a social occasion for the leading lady of the vice-kingdom that also pleased the convent, as the presence of aristocracy enhanced their own image. But, apparently some vicereines were excessively fond of these visits. As early as 1586, Doña Blanca Enríquez, wife of Viceroy Marquis of Villa Manrique, claimed she had the right to enter Santa Clara any time she wished. She was disabused by a court order, which allowed her to visit each convent only six times a year. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these visits were occasions for refreshment and entertainment, but were watched wearily by the prelates. By the mid-eighteenth century, the viceroy and vicereine and their retinue paid yearly visits to all the city nunneries, duly registered by a chronicler of the city. Each convent put out its best finery for the occasion, set a table laden with sweet meats and refreshments, and organized entertainment. Vicereine and nuns usually stayed until 10:00 or 11:00 at night, enjoying themselves.³ One must remember here the visits paid to the notable poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her convent of San Jerónimo by at least two vicereines, the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, and the eminent savant, Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, all of whom were members

of a larger group of persons who enjoyed her conversation and poetry.⁴ The strain caused by the pressure to maintain strict observance and the voluntary or involuntary trespasses noted by the prelates never declined because, while life within the convent provided nourishment for the spirit, it was imperative for it also to sustain the social and material needs of daily life.

OUR DAILY BREAD

Much of the goings-on in the parlor had to do with supplying the convent with its daily needs. No other concern was closer to the material dimension of a convent than the food supply destined to be consumed by the hundreds of women living in most of the nondiscalced nunneries. Supplying a convent was a daunting task, whether in times of abundance or in lean times. Even convents with a limited number of nuns, as the Capuchins and Carmelites, had to face the daily challenge of how to provide for their community, especially since they adhered more strictly to the vows of poverty and did not have large sources of income. After their foundation, some nunneries passed through precarious times in which their daily bread in a literal manner was hardly available. Patrons sent gifts of bread or other staples to help out, but only secure investments providing a steady income could ensure stability in the provision of food. The problem of attaining a comfortable material life was real for many convents in Mexico City, especially after the 1629 flood, which inflicted enormous damages to conventual properties as well as to their provision networks. The royal convent of Jesús María wrote the king in 1651, asking for a donation of 1,000 ducats to remedy the penury they were still suffering, due to the losses inflicted by that flood.⁵ Others simply did not have much money after their foundation for lack of charitable donations from patrons and a limited number of income-yielding properties. In the early eighteenth century, the inmates of the Pueblan beaterio of Santa Rosa de Santa María (later converted into a convent) had very little to eat. They were reduced to a diet of boiled beans and vegetables for three days, and fasted on bread and water during the remainder of the week.⁶ In 1720 the Abbess of Santa Clara in Mexico City estimated that she needed 3 pesos weekly for maintaining a nun with some comfort. This sum did not include the expenses of clothing or medicine.⁷ She obviously could not make ends meet, and seven years later, the sisters decided to raise the dowries from 3,000 to 4,000 pesos. At that point they had settled for a living cost of 20 reales (over 2 pesos) weekly or 130 pesos yearly. Each month each nun received 6 pesos for chocolate, and 70 pesos each December for her habit and the clothes of her servant. Some convents had to fight tooth and nail to maintain a “decent” style of life for their nuns, and were very often involved in litigations over properties or the inheritance of some of the sisters to secure a steady income.⁸

There was no standard system of purchase and distribution of food that applied to all convents at all times. Practices developed almost on an ad hoc basis to deal with various financial situations. The internal administrative organization of the convents shows that the abbess, the vicaria (second in command), and the council members decided how best to allocate their income to ensure that the basic needs of the community were met. Dowries and charitable donations could be used as investments that would guarantee the kitchen supply or, in a pinch, used to pay some bills.⁹

The early account books of the elite convent of Jesús María attest to the nature of the problems faced in providing for convents and their many inhabitants and dependents. The construction of the convent, which began in 1587, and the dowries of its first thirteen nuns financed by the king (capellanas) used much of the foundational donation of 30,000 ducats. The bankruptcy of the first majordomo left the nuns in dire straits in the first decades of the seventeenth century. An earthquake in 1611 damaged the building. Fortunately, the arrival of the Viceroy Marquis of Guadal-cázar and his wife María Riedrer, in 1612, marked a turn for the better. The vicereine, who had aspired to become a nun in her youth, obtained 4,000 pesos from the royal coffers through her influential husband to help the convent, and also wrote Philip IV on their behalf.¹⁰ In 1615, the Crown ordered the payment of 20,000 ducats (over 27,000 pesos) to Jesús María from the income of tithes. This allowed the convent to open its church in 1621, amidst public celebrations involving the court and the populace. That year the king promised another donation of 34,375 pesos, some of which was received in 1638 and the rest between 1668 and 1681.¹¹ Royal monies were often very slow in their discharge.

The magnificent displays of affluence on the day of the opening of the church of Jesús María, was, as in other convents, the result of the support of patrons, upon whom nunneries relied for many of the material aspects of life. The feast on the occasion of the opening belied the fact that the convent had been in debt and remained in a questionable economic situation. In 1605, for example, it owed 881 pesos for the purchase of beeswax, wine, saffron, cloth for vestments, and loans in cash. Sor Inés de la Cruz, the young accountant we have met in a previous chapter, faced a deteriorating administration and held the convent’s accounts together against all odds. In 1609, a new majordomo, Dr. Francisco de Leoz, began to supervise the convent’s finances on the advice of the archbishop and the viceroy.¹² By 1612 the convent was able to lend money to silver merchants, in search of some profits from the loans. Yet the accounts remained under the eye of the outside accountant for several years. In general the concern of both accountant and abbess was mostly addressed to balancing the budget, given the high consumption of staples.

Sor Isabel de la Concepción, abbess in 1617, informed the bishop on the daily demand for staples such as wood, sugar, oil and beans, and other needs, a system known as *plaza*. A bakery within the convent supplied the nuns their daily bread, but they also bought extra bread from an outside baker. Between March 1616 and May 1617, the consumption of flour, bread, and salt showed a total of 1,088 pesos.¹³ Between November and December 1632, Jesús María consumed 32 *cargas* of flour or around 9,600 pounds. They also paid 18 pesos to buy an extra supply of bread.¹⁴ In fact, most convents in Mexico City purchased their bread from bakers rather than baking it in-house. In the mid-seventeenth century, when many convents were experiencing economic difficulties, indebtedness to their bakers was not unusual.¹⁵ Denying bread to the nuns was possibly regarded as uncharitable, and bakers must have continued providing it despite mounting debts. Nunneries repaid them whenever possible, but catching up must have been difficult. Baker Miguel de Avila reported, in August 1671, that the convent of San Bernardo had paid 1,397 of the 1,680 pesos owed to him for the consumption of bread between March 12 and July 12, 1669.¹⁶ In that same year Jesús María spent 3 pesos, 2 tomines daily for bread for its fifty nuns. Protégées and servants were likely to have shared in the consumption. Bread continued to be a dietary staple that may have remained scarce and desirable in some poor convents. In Santa Inés, Sor Catalina de San Juan, who died in 1692, and who owned few material possessions, stipulated that they should be sold among the nuns themselves, and part of the product be distributed among the poor ones to “buy bread.”¹⁷

Conventual diet was rich in animal proteins, with mutton being their major source. Between April 1626 and August 1627, Jesús María consumed 665 arrobas (16,625 pounds or 6,927 kilograms) of mutton. In the following decade the sixty-plus nuns (and their servants) in the convent were consuming around thirty sheep weekly.¹⁸ The food purchases of this convent suggest a balanced diet, but we do not know how the food was distributed among the nuns, although we know that sick nuns received special attention and ate larger portions of mutton and chicken, plus special sweets to help them feel better.

It also seems that at some point sheep were slaughtered in the convent. Sor Marina de la Cruz was “punished” for her growing disaffection to Jesús María by being assigned the task of skinning, and quartering the sheep bought for the week. She also had to sweep and clean the chicken coops.¹⁹ The lay

sisters and servants normally performed such unpleasant operations, which, apparently, did not fall outside the realm of those believed to be appropriate for the weaker sex. However, to assign a professed nun to perform such lowly occupations was a clear sign of disdain and punishment. Understandably, once she became a Carmelite nun, Sor Marina became a vegetarian, eating mostly cheese, onions, squash and herbal soups, and chocolate as a beverage.²⁰ Other items purchased by Jesús María were dry and fresh beans, several types of fish, corn, lentils, chile, salt, pumpkins, eggs, oranges and other fruits, honey, lard, oil, cheese, and wine.²¹ Other convents followed a similar diet. The 1628 accounts from San Lorenzo show that for the nuns professed in that convent, beef and fish were the key sources of animal protein, complemented by a variety of beans and vegetables.²²

The diet adopted by each religious community reflected its economic situation and the special recommendations of its Rule. There was a significant difference between disalced, convents of rigorous observance in which the members of the community fasted consistently throughout the year and ate common meals in a refectory; and those of regular observance, which fasted only on prescribed occasions and whose nuns could have small kitchens and servants to cook their meals. Hagiographical examples notwithstanding, most nuns did not practice heroic acts of fasting, and ate regularly and well. Those hagiographical models extolled by admiring male writers were exceptional women who pursued control of their bodies by imitating saints and the Passion of Christ. They chose different ways of controlling their food intake, such as abstaining from meat, eating only what others left in their plates, or putting ashes or absinth in their meals. Such behavior was intended to make them more worthwhile in the eyes of the Lord.²³ A frugal nun could be held up as an example to her sisters, especially if the convent was experiencing economic straits. That was the case of Sor Tomasina de San Francisco, an exemplary nun from Jesús María. She drank two cups of chocolate every day, and ate a few mouthfuls of food at noon. According to Sigüenza y Góngora, who followed the hagiographical tradition in his narrative, she had once received some hens as a gift, but as she was planning to cook them for herself and some friends in the convent, God appeared and reprimanded her, exhorting her to give the hens to a very poor nun who was sick in the infirmary.²⁴

The Capuchins and Carmelites—as disalced nuns—disdained culinary niceties and banned any seasoning in their food that could please the sense of taste. The customary Carmelite diet consisted of a cup of white beans or any other grain, and as vegetables, some cactus nopales or squash with a small piece of fish and an egg. Their diet indicates that they had adopted chile, squash, and beans, typical American plants. They never ate pork or drank chocolate. Water was restricted to a single jug to be shared by two during meal time.²⁵ The disalced convents gave their nuns money to buy bread, but bought other staples to be used by the community, such as eggs, fish, beans, fruit, cooking oil, vinegar, sugar, salt, soap, and charcoal to cook. The most expensive item in the budget of San José, the Carmelite convent in Puebla, was bread. Each nun received 2 pesos daily to buy bread and the total annually was around 730 pesos. They also bought 190 arrobas of fish, which was their main source of food and proteins (3,750 lbs.). They had a vegetable garden and fruit trees within the cloisters.²⁶

All convents seem to have purchased the same staple items. Comparing the 1667 purchases of San Lorenzo and Santa Clara in Mexico City to those of San José in Puebla, we see many similarities. Santa Clara bought dried fish, chicken, and eggs as the main sources of proteins. Beans, garbanzo, and lima beans were also important items in the purchase list, and bacon was bought for rendering fat and adding flavor. The different kinds of beans were served on Friday and Saturday. Cilantro, chile, pepper, and saffron were the usual spices used in the food. As a Franciscan nun remarked to her superiors, their diet provided all that was necessary but did not indulge in the superfluous.²⁷

One item in conventual budgets that was not considered superfluous was chocolate. The consumption of chocolate by Mexican nuns has become a subject of legend. It appears as a beverage used as comfort food as well as a means to demonstrate hospitality. It accompanied the celebrations of Christmas Eve in Santa Catalina de Sena, while the nuns of Santa Inés used it during several religious feasts.²⁸ In 1670, the convent of San Bernardo in Mexico City bought 24 pounds weekly of cacao for their chocolate, 2 arrobas (50 lbs.) of sugar, and 12 ounces of cinnamon for flavoring it.²⁹ Nuns kept their chocolate in small boxes in their cells.³⁰ Grinding the chocolate was not cheap. San Bernardo paid 13 pesos, 6 reales weekly for that service. In the early 1740s Franciscan San Juan de la Penitencia allocated 50 pesos for *vizcochos* (small cakes) and chocolate for the confessors serving the community. During the same period in the eighteenth century, the convent of Santa Isabel, another Franciscan convent, followed the practice of its sister convent and had a yearly budget of 29 pesos for the same items to entertain their confessors.³¹ What they spent on chocolate for themselves, using their own money, is much harder to ascertain.³²

Thanks to the indefatigable reforming effort of a Franciscan Provincial, Fr. Hernando de la Rúa, we have yet another view of the foods consumed in the convents of seventeenth-century New Spain. Fr. Hernando arrived at the viceroyalty in 1666, with an ambitious plan to renew and reform the alleged bad habits of Franciscan nuns. He used Santa Clara de Querétaro as a lightning rod for his anger in a long and heated exchange with the nuns. He criticized the number of convent maids, the nuns' "mundane" lifestyle, their contacts with seculars, their excessive expenses, and other forms of behavior that he considered to be a "relaxation" of the proper observance of their Rules. To set the record straight, he wrote a long proposal in which he prescribed a remedy for every economic and observance ailment in the convent. Here we will look into the reforms he proposed to introduce in the kitchen, as they shed much light on conventual diet. For the internal provision and administration of the convent he recommended that, instead of nuns having their own meals cooked privately, as was the custom, they adopt the system of a refectory, with common meals for all. He claimed he was not proposing Capuchin rigor but simply a means to save money. Thus, he followed with a prolix instruction on the purchase of goods and staple foods to ensure that the nuns' meals were "decent and well seasoned," as well as less expensive. His recommendations were not a culinary treatise, but a description of the ingredients considered essential for a good table without immoderate waste and expenses.

Given the fact that the basic meat consumed in Santa Clara was lamb, he determined that each black-veiled nun should receive 20 ounces of lamb daily to satisfy the customary usage of eating one dish each of boiled, roasted, or stewed meat for lunch and two for dinner. This was a large amount of food for a single person, but the allocation probably took into consideration the fact that there was a retinue of people attached to each religious that would probably eat from that ration. Lay nuns would receive only 16 ounces of meat daily. Servants ate from the nuns' leftovers. Thus, the vertical social hierarchy prescribed the absolute dependence of the poor within the convent. Of course, all nuns shared their food with their servants as an act of charity, but the Commissary saw nothing wrong in reinforcing that relationship. La Rúa authorized 4½ pounds of bacon per week for either private consumption or for the communal pot, ensuring a diet rich in fats. On Thursdays, the nuns were to eat the "*gro-suras*," that is, organs such as brain, and stomach, and intestines. The head and the hooves of the lamb would also be consumed. Chiles and tomatoes, as well as salads would be served on days of fast. Other sources provided proteins and vitamins. Lentils and horse beans, eggs, fish, and shrimp were prescribed for Lent. However, to comply with the spirit of Lent, he prescribed 3 ounces of fish and 2 ounces of shrimp daily. During that season, dinner should include beans, horse beans, and a salad.

Sick nuns were allowed a special diet. La Rúa did not expect them to fast and he advised one pound of lamb and a hen to be divided among eight nuns

(possibly daily). Their common pot should be seasoned with vegetables and bacon, but should not include the use of vegetables of difficult digestion, such as cabbage. He advised chick peas as the best vegetable for sick nuns and he recommended the purchase of 3 *fanegas* (4.2 bushels) annually to supply the infirmary. Oil, lard, and vinegar remained staples for the larder. La Rúa prohibited the bakery within the cloister, but he allowed the maintenance of 500 to 600 hens in the conventual yard to supply the sick as well as the healthy nuns. To feed the hens, the convent should buy corn outside. La Rúa also prohibited feeding any visitors, including confessor and religious associated with the convent, attempting to break a tradition of hospitality deeply rooted by that time in most urban convents.

The Clares did not take the proposed reform lying down. They wrote La Rúa asking for time to think about the reforms, because they were convinced that their form of observance was perfectly canonical and legitimate. But Fr. Hernando was a man difficult to convince, and he would not budge from his position. In fact, he excommunicated the nuns. This antagonism caused a much publicized legal suit and “public scandal.” The nuns petitioned Viceroy Marquis of Mancera (1664–74), begging for his intervention, while establishing a legal suit seeking protection (*juicio de amparo*) against their prelate’s decision. The Crown supported the reforms devised by Father La Rúa for the governance of Franciscan convents, but it took several years in emitting its judgment. Despite royal support of their prelate, it is improbable that the nuns of Santa Clara changed their dietary regimen and their eating habits as stipulated by Fr. Hernando.³³

Even though nuns of regular observance were supposed to devote most of their time to religious pursuits, there was a tradition of good cooking in the convents. In fact, nuns developed recipes for sweet meats and main courses, possibly during their recreational time, or while supervising the work of the servants. Convents lacking in economic resources employed their black-veiled nuns in the kitchen cooking for the common refectory as part of their service to the community.³⁴ The development of a cooking style that became celebrated as a Mexican conventual culinary tradition took place during the seventeenth century, with the design of recipes for entrees and desserts that were much sought after by visitors and families. The blending of European and native products was part of a greater process of “globalization” or acculturation quietly taking place in the land. In Mexico, the use of squash, beans, and corn blended with the most important sources of animal protein brought from Europe. Conventual cooking could not have been 100 percent European because the cooks were largely Indian women and, while they may have helped baking wheat bread, they made corn tortillas for themselves and used their own style of seasoning in their mistresses’ food.

With so much cooking taking place in the convents, few recipe books have survived. One “art of cooking” book was mentioned in the inventory of Sor Manuela Ludovina de San Antonio, of San Bernardo, who died in 1684, and who also had several devotional books in her possession, mixing the mundane with the divine.³⁵ Two cookbooks claim a colonial and conventual provenance. One is presumed to have been transcribed by none other than the famous poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; the other is thought to have belonged to a large Mexico City convent.³⁶ The recipes are mostly for desserts of clearly Iberian origin with Islamic influence, calling for ingredients such as almonds, eggs, puff pastry, milk, and butter. A few recipes call for American fruits such as cherimoya and mamey, and yams. Only a few of the surviving recipes record entrees calling for fowl, rice, and meat. A possible explanation for the prevalence of sweets in these recipe books is the fact that nuns cooked those items as “gifts” for their patrons, or as easily saleable products in demand for special occasions. For example, every August 13, the city of Mexico had a public celebration to display the royal insignia and pay obeisance to the king (*paseo del pendón*). The sweets for the occasion were in part provided by the nunneries. In 1617, Santa Catalina de Sena provided 3 arrobas of sweets (75 lbs.), which included 144 gilded and perfumed hard sweets known as *pastillas de boca* (mouth watering pills), for which they were paid 75 pesos. Regina Coeli made 5 arrobas (150 lbs.) of several sweets, including the same *pastillas*, which earned them 120 pesos. San Jerónimo made 1,000 pieces of baked fruits, 25 pounds of *orejones* (baked sweet meats), and 20 dozen of the same fragrant *pastillas*, for which it was paid 86 pesos.³⁷ The confections were described as well handcrafted, and “costly.”

Catering such large amounts of sweets must have involved all the resources of the conventual kitchen as well as the personal input of private kitchens and numerous maids. Cooking and tasting, a universal sensory language, was a means to communicate with people outside, as when gifts were sent to patrons. It was also a “feminine” activity to be expected in a world populated by women. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who exercised the role of accountant for many years in her convent of San Jerónimo, has left one of the few recorded intellectual records of how cooking affected her. She is known to have sent “chocolate messages” (*recados de chocolate*) to the vicereines. To her *compadre* (godfather) she sent *pastillas de boca* and a short poem.³⁸ She adroitly mixed the mundane nature of the kitchen with the highest expression of her intellect. This was an exercise that she had learned during the early years of her life as a nun, when a zealous abbess forbade her to write the kinds of writings she indulged in, as secular and mundane to a religious mind. During that period, she used the occupations she was obliged to perform in the convent to question nature and “learn” from observation. In respect to cooking, she had the following comment:

And what shall I tell you, lady, on the natural secrets I have discovered while cooking? I see that an egg holds together and fries in butter or in oil, but, on the contrary, in syrup shrivels into shreds; observe that to keep sugar in a liquid one need only add a drop or two of water in which a quince or other bitter fruit has been soaked; observe that the yoke and the white of one egg are so dissimilar that each with sugar produces a result not obtainable with both together. I do not wish to weary you with such inconsequential matters . . . But, lady, as women, what wisdom may be ours if not the philosophies or the kitchen? Lupercio Leonardo spoke well when he said: how well one may philosophize when preparing dinner. And I often say, when observing these trivial details: Had Aristotle prepared victuals, he would have written more.³⁹

This rare insight into the process of thinking and learning from the contents of the cooking pot as part of the natural world hints at how a nun’s mind could go beyond the narrow confines of her cell. It also indicates that Sor Juana, like many other nuns, was involved in the process of cooking, displaying knowledge of the confection of sweets (syrops, conserves) and cooking with eggs as a staple food. Since she owned a slave it is unlikely that she spent much of her time cooking but, like other nuns, it was an occupation that gave an outlet to a very special form of creativity and a rest from her intellectual endeavors.

Rosalva Loreto López informs us that the organization of the kitchen personnel in the convents of Puebla was rigorous, with careful attention paid to the labor assigned and performed by several nuns and servants who worked constantly to keep the kitchen running on time and perfectly clean.⁴⁰ Working in the kitchen was compulsory in the discalced nuns’ convents, but kitchen tasks were also undertaken by some nondiscalced nuns as acts of humility. This served the convent well in times of need as well as in times of plenty. For all convents, “entertaining” their visitors in the parlors was a form of hospitality that no self-respecting community would eschew. “Little bites” (*bocaditos*) of sweet breads and fruit compotes were created to

please visiting majordomos, prelates, confessors, and families, and those delicacies were exchanged among convents themselves. Among the most famous entrees developed in the convents of Puebla was the mole, a sauce containing chiles, almonds, chocolate, onions, broth, and spices, which was prepared preferably for poultry.⁴¹

OTHER ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE CONVENT

While the pursuit of religious perfection was the main goal of the nuns and it required many hours of dedication to prayer, it is also true that the administration of the community demanded many hours of their daily activities. Cooking, as it has been seen, was a channel for the creativity of those nuns who felt the calling of a culinary vocation. However, in tune with their social class, sewing, embroidering, and needlework (labor *de manos*) were regarded as more appropriate for nuns. Following the understanding that all occupations had a symbolic meaning, needlework was praised and encouraged by confessors. The redoubtable and influential Antonio Núñez, S.J. had valuable advice for his religious disciples on needlework. Nuns should not spend all their time in spiritual exercises or prayer. The demands of religious life called for periods of rest, for which he strongly advised needlework. He recalled how in former times needlework helped to sustain the convents and recommended the pursuit of this occupation, regardless of how comfortable or well provided for was the convent, or how affluent the nun could be. Rich nuns should not be embarrassed to engage in needlework, and take the example of Queen Margaret, the wife of Phillip III, and her attending ladies' who embroidered altar cloth. "In the same vein, you and your servants can engage in needlework, to help with your clothes and sustenance, as well as theirs . . . and if the Lord has provided you with abundance in your life that you have even enough to help others, you should not excuse yourself from this daily occupation, so convenient and necessary to avoid idleness and, above all, impertinent visits and the waste of your time."⁴²

While occupied with their hands nuns avoided temptations. In the solitude of this task they could exercise mental prayer, and avoid the idleness and socialization with other nuns that could deviate from their stated goals in the convent. José de la Parra, chronicler of the Carmelites of Puebla, was quite aware that their needlework was a means to earn needed income in the mid-seventeenth century. Lacking patrons, and with their building unfinished, the nuns spooled silk and embroidered for customers. De la Parra saw in both occupations much to praise as training exercises for daily life as well as for spiritual life, insofar as they demanded the virtues of patience and application.⁴³ Manual work also helped them to suffer with resignation any inconvenience or trouble they might have experienced. According to de la Parra, the lay community was "edified" by the sight of nuns engaged in needlework to help the convent survive. With the blessing of confessors, these female occupations became ritualized and spiritualized, transcending their conventional commonplace. Engagement in needlework was recorded in some diaries as an important part of daily life and a means to engage in silent prayer. Sor María Marcela, of the Capuchin Convent in Querétaro, mentions how the threads of her needlework inspired her to "thread" her prayers to God. "While I was engaged in my work I begged God to join my soul as I join the threads, and I offer as many acts of love as the stitches I made."⁴⁴

In a convent that was apparently struggling with a limited budget, sewing was a means whereby poor nuns could earn money for their daily needs. In Santa Catarina de Sena, Mexico City, several nuns sewed their own habits and personal garments. Sor María de la Asunción sewed and sold her needlework, using the proceeds to buy several silver candlesticks for the main altar. She also made ointments and prepared medicines for the sick.⁴⁵ Sor María del Costado de la Sangre de Cristo, Sor Catarina de San José, and Sor María de Cristo, among the first Carmelites to profess in Mexico City, were remembered by the Order's chronicler as experts in needlework and point lace, all done in observant silence. María de Cristo was said to derive much spiritual peace from making "things" for her Lord, while Sor Catarina's embroidery, woven silk ornaments, and paper flowers became ornaments for the convent's church during the saints' feasts.⁴⁶ Sor Beatriz de San Buenaventura, from the fairly poor Franciscan convent of Santa Clara in the valley of Atrisco, sewed for the conventual church, and her biographer praised her activity, pontificating on the sanctity of a well-mended habit, which spoke both of humility and expertise with the needle. Dominican Sor Mariana de Santo Domingo used the earnings of her manual labor for charity to the needy, inside and outside the convent. Regardless of the purpose, needlework was part of femininity that nuns could not escape. The inventories of their earthly possessions very often listed needles, thimble, thread, and embroidery frames.⁴⁷

But the gentle hand that wielded the needle could wield harsher and less feminine tools. The poverty of some convents in the seventeenth century obliged the nuns to do more than sewing. We have seen how they could bake, tend chicken coops, and even act as butchers, although the latter was more of an exceptional situation than the norm. The financial demands of Santa Clara in Atrisco added to the fervor most founders evinced and spurred special demonstrations of physical activities in some nuns. Writing in the mid-seventeenth century, Dominican Fr. Alonso Franco extolled the energy Sor Ana de San Francisco displayed by getting up at 4:00 a.m. to sweep the convent and clean up the kitchen. As he mused, observance flowered in the then recently founded convent.⁴⁸ He also reported how Sor Leonor de San Iván hauled stones for the construction of the convent in the 1620s, while Sor María Ana de San Antonio would not admit any other occupation within the convent except that of *obrero* (engaged in physical labor).⁴⁹ Sor María de Jesús Felipa, of San Juan de la Penitencia in Mexico, hints in her diary that she had to supervise the workers engaged in the repairs of the convent. In doing so, she exposed herself to the vagaries of the weather, all of which served her as a venue for mortification. She avoided engaging in conversations with the men and used her time to pray.⁵⁰

When Sor Marina de la Cruz first professed in the convent of Jesús María, she was over fifty years old, and a widow with a daughter. She was assumed to be beyond the ability of learning the more difficult of the regular prayers and conventual ceremonies and was, therefore, directed to supervise the journeymen working in the convent, which was still under construction. This duty entailed keeping watch on the men to prevent any communication with the female servants, but she chose to add physical labor as an act of devotion. In this task, according to Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, she worked "as one of them [the male workers] and helped them with great fervor. She passed them stones, filled up chinks in the walls, beat the mortar, and organized the scaffolds."⁵¹ Needless to say, she fell ill after a few months with what was described as pains in her body aggravated with constant running of the eyes. Impressive as they are, these cases of hard labor during construction or repairs of the convent are exceptional rather than frequent. In fact, by the eighteenth century they were memories to be treasured, especially in the convents of the viceregal capital.

Music and singing, on the other hand, were appropriate for women, and they offered some nuns a venue not only of entertainment but of religious expression. Those sisters with special abilities in music or singing were lovingly remembered in conventual chronicles. The Carmelite's Constitutions allowed music as a form of recreation and one of its nuns in Puebla, Luisa Nicolasa de la Santísima Trinidad, seems to have embodied the ideal blending of learning and art to serve God.⁵² She professed in 1649, receiving the habit from Bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza. Her ability to play the harp and the cittern was complemented by her sweet voice, which she employed in songs praising God and imparting moral lessons about the briefness of life. She also played music every Tuesday in a chapel the convent had in its garden devoted to Santa Anna. This was no mere pleasure, for Sor Nicolasa accompanied her musical offerings with prayer and physical penitence. Gómez de la Parra compared her to Saint Cecilia.

This idealized memory of a nun with musical abilities was perhaps what some humble aspirants had in mind when they learned to play an instrument or trained their voices in the hope of entering a convent without a dowry. Santa Catalina de Sena, in Mexico City, had a trained body of singers for all its religious offices. Fr. Alonso Franco, as chronicler of the Dominican Order, remembered one occasion when the singers were so heartbroken by the death of a venerated nun that they could not sing in her funeral mass. He also extolled the memory of Sor Anna de San Francisco, whose exceptional gifts as musician and singer were learned in the convent, not at home. At Santa Catalina, Sor Anna learned all the instruments she could play and was “*cantora*” (singer) for many years as well as teacher of all the young girls who showed aptitude. Inevitably, as part of the process of creating legendary figures for his Order, Franco tells of a miraculous event involving the musician. One day, while she was playing and singing a song in honor of baby Jesus, a young boy came and rearranged the sleeves of her habit for greater comfort. The young boy was noted and “recognized” as Jesus by one of the girls in the attendance. Franco took this opportunity to pontificate on the spiritual beauties of singing. When a nun sang in the choir with purity of conscience and devoted intention she pleased God. He summed up his homage to Sor Anna with baroque imagery: “In Sor Anna de San Francisco, we find the bass of humility, the alto of prayer, the treble of contemplation, the contralto of purity and finally all the choir of virtues, and the chapel master who guides and governs all the voices, which is the love of God.”⁵³

Angelic voices and the playing of music, however, were not always welcomed activities in the convent. Under the reform drive that seems to have enveloped their Order in the late seventeenth century, some Franciscan prelates adopted a negative attitude about conventual music. In 1702, two members of the Order refused to grant that venue to a dowerless applicant in Santa Isabel who was hoping to enter as a musician. That year, the nuns of the convent wrote a letter to their prelate informing him that the convent had few singers and those available were sick and unable to help in the conventual divine offices. They had a promising aspirant: Gregoria de Alarcón, daughter of a Pueblan couple, who had been examined by the chapel master of the cathedral and their own vicar. They found her able to play the harp and the treble and the community asked permission to receive her as a novice. It was denied, with citations of a papal bull of Innocent XI (1679), and the Franciscan Constitutions of 1639. The bull forbade the Provincial of the Order to meddle with dowries or to advise on receiving nuns without them for any reason whatsoever. The Constitution established that Franciscan nuns should use plain singing in their divine offices, without organ or counterpoint.⁵⁴ Observing this Rule, the prelates recommended that all the nuns should sing, obviating the need for special performers. The aesthetic impoverishment of ceremonial rituals in Franciscan convents was not necessarily followed in other convents of more means, such as La Concepción in Mexico City. In 1747, Sor María Rosa de San José sought permission to switch from playing the oboe to playing the viola, which she was learning at her own cost. She claimed that playing the oboe was causing her an excruciating wound in her tongue.⁵⁵

SERVANTS

Praying, helping with conventual tasks, engaging in needlework, or playing music and singing were acceptable occupations for professed nuns, but all around the black- and white-veiled nuns, innumerable servants and personal slaves toiled daily in the convent, serving their mistresses and performing the heaviest chores of the convent. Even the Capuchin and discalced orders had servants to help perform the most demeaning jobs in the community. Servants came from the lowest rungs of the general population and were, typically, Indians, mixed-bloods, and women of African descent whose families saw in the convent a safe place where they could work and live in exchange for food and a secure shelter. They were expected to remain within the premises of the convent with occasional permissions to visit their families. In fact, they could live an entire life in the convent, not necessarily receiving any other reward than their keep and occasional clothing. In 1720, sixteen servants who were employed by Santa Clara in Mexico City were given one peso weekly and their clothes, which amounted to 992 pesos yearly.⁵⁶ Being at the mercy of their mistresses, they could be dismissed if their behavior was deemed improper. While these conditions may seem harsh today, they were acceptable throughout the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Convents never lacked women desiring to enter into service. The travails of poor lay women outside the convent were many, and the cloisters were a plausible alternative offering food and shelter. There were at least three layers of serving women in convents: servants, slaves, and donadas. The latter were women who had been either given by a patron or given themselves to the convent in perpetuity. Donadas were servants by another name, almost close to slavery insofar as they could never leave the convent.

Given the needs of poor urban women, the number of servants employed in convents began to grow in the seventeenth century, reaching levels that some prelates felt were objectionable for the observance of their Rules. The convent of Santa Clara, Querétaro, was reputed to have 500 servants in the 1660s, while the number of nuns did not reach 100. Even novices were allowed servants.⁵⁷ Freshly arrived from the peninsula, bishops and archbishops were “shocked” to see the motley crowd of women in the large convents, and began to use the word “relaxation” to express their desire for a cutback in conventual populations. Servants were the main target of their critique. As Bishop of Puebla, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza (1640–55) acknowledged that in the Indies, women’s convents had too many servants, but in a pragmatic concession to reality he did not attempt to change the situation.⁵⁸ Not all prelates reacted to the problem in such a sanguine manner. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Franciscan Order, at the initiative of some zealous Commissary Generals, waged a war against servants in its convents. In 1659, Fr. Bartolomé de Tapia, then Provincial, was irritated by the fact that servants would leave the convent to accompany novices on the “day of freedom,” the last day before their profession. He argued that since parents and family kept them company, there was absolutely no need for servants to participate on that occasion.⁵⁹

With the arrival of Fr. Hernando de la Rúa as Commissary General of the Franciscan Order, Franciscan nuns faced a severe challenge to their accustomed ways, especially in regard to the use of their servants. Viceroy Marques of Mancera (1664–74) ordered the nuns of Santa Clara in Querétaro to reduce the number of their servants to 110. La Ruá also attempted to curtail the number in the convent of Santa Clara in the capital to forty-six, although giving the nuns the right to increase that number if they could prove they needed more. The nuns decided to disobey their prelate.⁶⁰ They first resorted to the Audiencia, using a legal appeal called *recurso de fuerza*, which allowed the nuns to contest their superiors’ orders. The Audiencia sided with the nuns, requesting Fr. Hernando to adopt moderation in regard to his orders on the issue of servants, and allow the nuns to retain them.⁶¹ Fr. Hernando chose to disregard the court’s recommendation. Thus began a battle of wills and a process that lasted over a decade and entailed a reform in the administration of the internal affairs of the convent. The nuns were intent on being heard, and appointed lawyers to represent them before the Audiencia, where their case was reviewed in 1667. San Juan de la Penitencia and its abbess, Isabel de la Anunciación, argued that since their foundation eighty years before they had been allowed servants, and that they had professed with the understanding that they would retain them. Further, the custom of having servants was not against their observance, insofar as a good number of Commissars General, born in Spain and in Mexico, and “men selected for that office, of known letters, virtue and exemplary in religion and governance” had approved their way of life.⁶² This was a slanted remark questioning La Rúa’s assumption that he could be holier than his predecessors. The Clares argued that subjects of “these provinces,” meaning New Spain and possibly the New World, “were no less observant of their Rules, although possibly different from those of Spain.” Any proposed change in their manner of observance should be consonant “with the nature of the land and its customs” (“*la calidad de la tierra y costumbres*”). Santa Isabel

argued that its founder, Catalina de Peralta, had brought servants with her to the convent, and that she had a mulatto slave. Customs and practices had the strength of the law. While this may not have been an expression of developed Mexican identity, there is an inescapable sense of self-assurance and a will to preserve their own habits, even if they were considered “bad” by their prelates. The nuns were claiming a right to be different on account of their birth in another geographical setting. There was an implicit recognition that observance in Mexico was unlike that in Spain, but acceptable nonetheless. The sisters also requested that those who were being raised or taught at the convent receive the same courtesy of retaining their servants, since many of them later professed and brought dowries and economic benefits to the convent. Thirty-five nuns signed the document submitted to the Audiencia. The Commissar General of the Order was not impressed. In mid-March 1667, he excommunicated the abbess and the vicarias, his most powerful spiritual condemnation. Any attempt to create a “criollo” or Mexican observance was unacceptable to him.

The excommunication was more than the viceroy and the Audiencia could tolerate. Favoring the nuns, they asked the Commissar to remove it until the Audiencia itself took a final decision on the matter. La Rúa “obeyed but did not fulfill,” a gesture that viceroys could sometimes adopt in regard to a royal order when they thought they could advise the king on a royal decision without disobeying him. He never intended to lose this battle and characterized the abbess and her vicarias as obdurately disobedient. He claimed the nuns had refused to listen to him even though he had received an acceptance of his ruling from some of them. Therefore, he was obliged to use the only arm left to him to impose order among subjects who wished to defy his ecclesiastic authority. He did not lift the excommunication. In fact, he gave orders to remove the abbess of San Juan de la Penitencia and appoint a new one, and to send the excommunicated sister to a virtual prison within the convent. He reminded everybody concerned he had been appointed by the Council of the Indies, and his decision to cut back the number of servants was in agreement with the ordinances of the Council of Trent and backed by several papal bulls. There was an urgent need to restore “monastic moderation in these parts.” He also brought up a Franciscan preacher to testify that the forty-six servants assigned to the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia were sufficient to serve its needs, and that the convent of Santa Inés had accepted the reform in the number of servants. However, San Juan de la Penitencia brought its own witness, physician Juan de Moreno, who claimed that having looked after the nuns’ health for eighteen years, he could certify that they suffered many sicknesses and were in need of their maids. The convent was so poor that it could not pay for his services and he assisted them without fees. San Juan de la Penitencia’s lawyer asked that the deposed abbess be returned to her position. Public scandal was beginning to surround the issue.

Fr. Hernando’s attempt to break the nuns’ will with the appointment of another abbess did not succeed. In a final act of defiance Sor María de Cristo, his appointee, and several other nuns renounced their appointments on grounds of poor health. Accepting them, they said, was against their conscience and could cause a schism in the community.⁶³ This statement speaks of how deeply these nuns cared for their “way of life” as well as of their sense of solidarity and loyalty to their own community.

Officially, the last word belonged to Fr. Hernando, but he had already left New Spain when, in 1678, the Crown chastised the Audiencia for having meddled in the internal affairs of the Order and for having heard the nuns’ case, especially since the Commissar had the viceroy’s support. It advised that body to leave the Franciscan prelates to exercise their ministry as they saw fit.⁶⁴ Santa Clara of Querétaro, unlike other Franciscan convents, was a royal convent under the jurisdiction of the secular church, and in 1673, Archbishop Payo de Ribera took his own decision to make no changes in the number of servants. The issue of the number of servants resurfaced in November 1701, when Fr. Luis Morote reminded the Abbess of Santa Isabel that nuns should only have one servant each. Abbess Sor María de San Francisco, in her yearly account, had reported thirty-eight sisters and forty-nine servants, one of whom was over eighty years old. Morote’s recommendation looks more pro forma than like a real effort to make Sor María reduce the number of servants.⁶⁵ The struggle over servants between the mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries remained inconclusive and spotty. Even after the encounters between prelates and nuns in the Franciscan Order, there is no hard evidence that they or any other nondiscalced convents effectively and voluntarily reduced the number of their servants until the battle for a reform of observance (*vida común*) began in the late 1760s.⁶⁶

Despite all the tensions between nuns and their prelates on their account, few servants registered chords in conventual memory. Although they had a role more important than history can corroborate, they appear only as fleeting glimpses in biographies, chronicles, and conventual documents. They were collectively referred to as “*las mozas de servicio*” (service women) in different sources, such as the accounts, chronicles, or legal suits, but most are faceless shadows in charge of the professed nuns. “It takes a lot of patience to be teacher of the servants” (*maestra de mozas*), wrote Fr. Alonso Franco to eulogize the nun who gave them religious indoctrination.⁶⁷ It fell to the abbess to look after the basic needs of servants, protégées, and poor nuns alike. As such, in November 1632, the Abbess of Jesús María gave extra money to sick nuns and poor servants. In December she allocated 13 pesos in blue cloth for the “servant girls’ ” underskirts.⁶⁸ A century and a half later, in 1806, La Encarnación paid 48 pesos to an infirmiry servant who must have performed valuable aid with the sick nuns.⁶⁹

Servants who stayed with their mistresses for many years became indispensable to them and established bonds that verged on intimacy. Fr. José Gómez, biographer of Querétaro’s Franciscan Sor Antonia de San Jacinto, narrated how, despite suffering her own maid’s bad temper for years, she had established a special relationship with her. While most of the details of their lives are skipped, the biographer chose to tell how Sor Antonia asked her servant Nicolasa to strike her as part of her penitential discipline. Her biographer eulogized this peculiar request as a sign of the nun’s humility, subjecting herself to a beating from her maid. When Sor Antonia asked Nicolasa to lash her three times a week during Lent, the maid reluctantly agreed. However, when Sor Antonia asked to be dragged by a rope around her neck, the servant demurred. Angered by the denial, Sor Antonia abused the maid verbally. Later, she begged God’s forgiveness and, as proof of her sincerity and humility, washed and kissed the feet of the servant many times, in an obvious imitation of Christ.⁷⁰ Sor Isabel de San José, of Jesús María, also took body discipline from the hands of a servant.⁷¹ The nuns’ desire to punish their bodies in imitation of Christ reversed the roles between servants and mistresses. The ascetic practices of baroque spirituality inverted the social order, but only within the cloisters, within the narrow confines of a cell, and in the ephemeral moment of an act of religious piety.

These examples may have been atypical forms of behavior of exceptional nuns, but the story of such behavior for seventeenth-century readers involved a double purpose: to present the notable nun as an embodiment of observance in the practice of disciplines, and also as humble enough to break the class barriers between themselves and their social inferiors. In both cases, the “lesson” of virtue would not be lost. Sor Antonia had witnessed with regret her mother’s physical punishment of servants at home. As a nun she had the opportunity to prove her kindness to servants. On the other hand, her biological sister, also a nun in the convent, was prepared to beat a servant who, we are told, spoke to Sor Antonia disrespectfully. She had waited in a dark room for the servant and removing her shoe was prepared to give her a good beating, when Sor Antonia interposed herself between both and received the strikes without her sister knowing whom she was striking.⁷² Nuns beating servants? The paradigms of religious perfection did not include such possibilities, but incidents like this may not have been unusual, especially because striking servants was not an infrequent occurrence in New Spain.

At the bottom of the convent's social scale were the slaves. Owned property, they belonged to those nuns who could afford them in convents that allowed them. Families wanting to ensure the comfort of their daughters within the cloisters provided the slaves if nothing in the Rules prohibited their services. When Clara Mejía de Vera drew her will in 1696, she left 4,000 pesos for the profession of a young girl named Josefa Mejía, whose relation to her is never stated, and who was living with a cousin of the testator in the convent of Balvanera. She should also receive a young mulatto slave, who at the time was only three years old, to help her.⁷³ If Josefa professed, the slave should be considered part of her property to increase the number of servants in Balvanera. Sor Ursula de San Nicolás, at La Encarnación, wrote the Vicar of Nuns in January 1709, asking him permission to return a black slave given to her by her sister because "she has turned out to be contrary to my liking." She wished her sister to sell her and buy her another.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Luisa Nicolasa de la Santísima Trinidad, of San Lorenzo, freed her slave in 1710.⁷⁵ Not so María Josefa de los Dolores, of the same convent, who left a little black girl, six years old, to the convent. On receiving such donations, convents decided whether to retain the slaves or sell them. After Mother María de San Gabriel died in 1688 in La Encarnación, the abbess consulted the slave on whether she wished to stay in the convent or be sold. María, the slave, was twenty years old and had been born in the home of the deceased. It was her expressed wish not to stay in the convent and be sold. The nuns carried out her wish, asking the archbishopric to give her permission to use the amount of her sale to pay masses for the soul of Sor María.⁷⁶ San Jerónimo, La Concepción, and Santa Inés, in Mexico, owned slaves as community property to perform heavy-duty work and to serve all nuns rather than a particular mistress.⁷⁷ In 1672, the Vicereine Marquis of Mancera donated a slave to Sor Ana de San Teodoro, a nun in San Jerónimo, to serve her and her three professed sisters.⁷⁸ María Vélez de Escalante, a wealthy heir professing in La Concepción, Mexico, in 1704, had three mulatto slaves. In her will she disclosed that they should be freed at her death.⁷⁹ If she lived a long life, it is unlikely these servants would ever leave the convent. Why should a nun need three slaves to serve her? A woman of wealth such as Sor María Petronila de Santa Teresa, as María was known after her profession, did not give up her lifestyle when she professed. Later in the century, prelates who wished to change that lifestyle would have a tough battle persuading women like her to give up their servants. On the other hand, lack of much evidence about slaves in the late eighteenth century suggests that the practice may have been rapidly declining, as the slave population itself diminished.

The relationship between slaves and their mistresses in the convent is difficult to define, for lack of clues to guide us. Exceptionally, we learn of unusual cases that make us ponder exactly how the threads of their lives intertwined. One such case is that of Sor Lorenza de la Presentación, of Santa Catalina de Sena, and two slaves who lived with her, but who belonged to the then deceased Canon Don José de Villegas Jara. Don José must have been a relative of Sor Lorenza, and "lent" her the slaves for the duration of his life. The execution of his testament began in 1755. He ordered the two slaves to be freed and given 100 pesos each from his estate.⁸⁰ The will was duly carried out, and the slaves left the convent. One of them, María de la Encarnación, died before she could receive her inheritance, which passed to her surviving sister, María Isabel Solís, who was already married and who was given her freedom on May 13, 1764. This story may not have been unusual except for the considerable amounts of money requested by Sor Lorenza to dress María Isabel and María de la Encarnación. Short notes written by the nun between late 1755 and January 17, 1759, requested various sums from Bernardo Fon-serrada, Don José's executor, who sent her everything she requested.

Sor Lorenza was not seeking for cheap fabrics to dress her putative slaves. She was asking for the finest. In March 1756, she asked for skirts, several kinds of cloth, lace, and a *rebozo* (shawl) for a value of 11 pesos, ½ reale. Within one month, in April, she charged 18 pesos, 3½ reales for more cloth and the cost of having several dresses made. On February 1757, she called for two pairs of shoes, and in several other notes she asked for more silk, skirts, and shoes. The account for January 17, 1759, was for 30 pesos. The final note was issued on January 13, 1764, for 32 pesos in payment of María de la Encarnación's funeral. Altogether, the executor disbursed 726 pesos, 3 reales in eleven notes, nine of which had been requested by Sor Lorenza. Why would a nun wish to dress up so well two of her slaves? Speculation about using the slaves as putative mannequins to display her taste for clothes or her social status will remain hypothetical, but plausible. Judging by this case, some mistresses may have liked well-dressed slaves as a reflection of their benevolence and charity. Sor Lorenza liked the slaves, and the way she treated them reflected on her. Be it charity or display, these women of such disparate social standing established a bond the quality of which will remain obscure to us but, nevertheless, expressed itself through the simple language of dress.

Another peculiar and distinctive situation created by the presence of either slaves or servants of African extraction was their vocation for spiritual life. Nothing barred them from sharing the sentiments resulting from faith, even though rules and prejudice did not permit them to share in full the status of brides of Christ. In fact, the flowering of spirituality in women of low social status provoked admiration and even reverence, not only in New Spain but elsewhere in the colonies.⁸¹ The basic assumption was that it was highly improbable that a black servant or slave would have the sensitivity, resolve, or even the special vocation required to profess. When one of them proved to possess such qualifications, the response was one of awe and a display of respect for the way in which the will of God made itself known. The lower the venue the higher the moral lesson derived from it.

Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora took the trouble of preserving the memory of María de San Juan, a black servant and donada of the convent of Jesús María, a place she earned for her notable virtues. She was born in Mexico, a criolla, not a *bozal* (or nonacclimatized slave bought directly at the slave market). Sigüenza was unsure whether she was originally a slave of one of the canons of the Metropolitan Church who donated her to the convent of Jesús María, so that "by imitating all the good she would see there, she became saintly."⁸² This statement acknowledged the feasibility of imitating the nuns and achieving a state of grace, as well as the disposition of some masters to allow such possibility to a servant. Of course, that also implied the ability of the slave to acquire such virtues. María de San Juan was given the task of substituting for a nun who surveyed the construction of the convent, which means that she was already living in the convent in the second decade of the seventeenth century. She spent her free time praying in the coro, deep in contemplation of a favorite image of baby Jesus. Her virtuous life earned her the confidence of the abbesses, who entrusted her with another task that, according to Sigüenza, should have been in the hands of a respected professed nun. It was the surveillance of the younger servants who were sent to the roof of the convent to ring the bells and ensure that they did not engage in any conversation with people from outside the convent. Apparently, this was what the servants did and wished to do, and because they resented María's strict surveillance, she suffered their insults and affronts patiently and returned them "prudent advice."

It is inferred that María de San Juan had a longing to make the formal vows the nuns undertook, but the chronicler avoided the topic by telling how the Devil filled her with confusion and prevented her from doing so. It remains unclear in this terse statement how a black servant could have wished to make the vows denied to all of her race. The assumption was that they could have been made in spirit if not in reality. The issue was solved by a dream, in which she saw herself taken to heaven to witness a magnificent celebration with music and a display of ornaments. She understood the reception as being made in honor of her "profession." Could the dream be a true sign or just a delusion? Sor Marina de la Cruz, a nun with visionary gifts, took her out of her doubts. She confirmed that the dream was an expression of God's mercy and it was real, encouraging the humble servant to pursue her spiritual exercises because it was agreeable to God. But, there is no information about the "vows," and whether María de San Juan made them in private

or not remains a mystery. On several instances she had the gift of “seeing,” one of which pitted her against a presumed crypto-Jew, and the other the Devil himself. She “sensed” that the Jew was desecrating an image, and she talked directly to the Devil, who was making a dreadful noise with the convent’s organ. This “poor one” (*pobrecita*) symbolized all the humble people whom God wished to use to teach the haughty, but for all her gifts her life as a servant did not change. She died in 1634, and, as we are told, “she went to heaven.” Rewards for the meek and black had to wait for the other world. Her prayers in the convent may have been addressed to her freedom or her acceptance as a nun, but we will never know, and they did not move the sisters to do either.

The only other black woman to gain notoriety in New Spain was Juana Esperanza de San Alberto, who achieved the feat of receiving the religious habit in the Pueblan Carmelite convent of San José one year before her death. Sister San Alberto was a showcase for the convent and for the Order, a fact that chronicler José Gómez de la Parra underlined with baroque detail.⁸³ She was a full-blooded bozal African brought to the port of Veracruz when she was four or five years old with a younger sister. She belonged to the convent as the last wish of her mistress, María Fajardo, who once widowed entered the convent during her last sickness, and received the habit in *artículo mortis* in 1611. The prelates allowed the slave to stay and she remained for sixty-eight years. She followed the Carmelite Rule in its entire rigor and performed kitchen and infirmary tasks, aware of her condition, and with the humility for which she was later praised. Playing with metaphors, her biographer compared her to burning charcoal with the flame of God’s love within. He eulogized her as a true Carmelite jewel, but could not help presenting her as the embodiment of an antithesis: black, poor, ignorant, and rustic, and yet, as precious as jet and an edifying example for the other nuns. It is true that once in a while some of them forgot their charity and treated her as a slave, but Juana Esperanza de San Alberto always responded with grace and charity. On more than one occasion the biographer recounted how the community forgot her on solemn occasions when she was already a semi-invalid. But regardless of such lapses, she was held in great esteem.

On her way back to Spain in 1673, the Vicereine Marchioness of Mancera, who had donated a slave to a nun in San Jerónimo, visited the community and talked to Juana Esperanza for a long time, asking for her prayers. The Vicereine shared her contemporaries’ blindness to issues of social equity. Ailments in her legs and bad sight rendered Juana almost invalid in her old age. In 1676, two visiting Carmelite friars suggested that she be given the habit. They argued that being black should not make someone who had lived in such observance miss all the benefits promised to those professing the Order of Saint Teresa. However, no one in the community could convince her to take the steps to ask for the habit. Eventually, Dean Diego de Malpartida was able to obtain a promise from her that she would request the habit when she felt close to death. This she did in 1678, after suffering a near fatal accident. She professed with the assistance of all the community. For one year after that she laid in bed, a professed nun, receiving the aid of her sisters, who at this point fought among themselves to serve her.

When she died on October 10, 1679, the whole city and the highest members of its elite attended her funeral. A Knight of Santiago paid for the candles and wax of her sumptuous funeral monument. The ecclesiastical Cabildo came to view her body and, as it was the custom, people begged for relics, anything she touched or used. The priests who came to bury her kissed her hands. According to the biographer, the room in which she lay was filled with a strange odor and her countenance rejuvenated. These were signs of her grace, a fact confirmed by a vision held by another nun, who claimed to have seen her dancing with the Divine Lamb, a sign of her salvation.

In contrast with the terse, although respectful, statements of Sigüenza y Góngora on María de San Juan, de la Parra showered the memory of the black Carmelite with the highest praises as a true example for her community. God himself had brought her to New Spain, he claimed, so that the convent be adorned with her virtues. Her presence in Puebla was unique. No other convent could boast a black nun, and the writer urged the community to consider her as a divine favor and a source of inspiration. As his task was that of elevating the standing of his Order, de la Parra was proud that the Carmelites had accepted this exceptional spirit as one of their own. She was a model of observance, an achievement that some spiritual directors saw as more desirable for professed nuns than the visions and supernatural experiences preferred by many of them as proof of their piety. The stories of these black holy women bring the entire community of nameless servants and slaves into focus, and restored their humanity to some, although the great majority labored as a shapeless mass without much official recognition throughout their lives. Their exceptionality underlines the obscurity of those who surrounded the core of professed nuns, and carried out their lives with the humbleness and humility that their mistresses endeavored so much to achieve themselves.

OTHER WORLDLY COMMITMENTS

When not preoccupied by religious duties or the governance of the convent, the supplies of food, and the inner order of the community, nuns tended to a myriad of other occupations and tried to solve many problems which could easily be characterized as “worldly,” insofar as they were pertinent to the survival of the institution and their own personal interests. Litigations and appeals to ecclesiastic and civil authorities kept the counseling nuns and the abbess busy with nonreligious issues. Problems came in a variety of forms, and they required the services of lawyers, administrators, and ecclesiastical advisors, who visited the convents frequently to deliver news, request signatures, and discuss strategies with the nuns. Sometimes resorting to the judiciary involved the most elemental need to survive as an institution, as was the case of the convent of Santa Clara of Mexico City, which in 1588 had to appeal to the Audiencia to request the promised royal financial aid. Claiming “hunger and nudity,” the convent asked the Audiencia to receive and to speed up a second petition to His Majesty. At the time, the convent lodged 140 sisters and over 40 servants and had spent most of its resources in the construction of the convent. This petition demanded notarized statements from the administrator and other friends.⁸⁴

Suits against their majordomos over mismanagement were not frequent, but were real for many convents that had suffered loss of income due to shady or inept management of their funds. Such was the case of La Concepción of Mexico City, in 1758, when it was forced to sue Juan de Albornoz, its ex-majordomo, for 9,387 pesos, 6 reales owed to it from the rent of its houses. He had neglected to give them receipts for the rent and for clothes and objects impounded from debtors.⁸⁵ If a majordomo died in office, the incoming majordomo was obliged to tally his accounts with those of the nun accountants. Any irregularities by the deceased were taken to litigation with his heirs. In 1787, the nuns of La Encarnación and their new majordomo sued the estate of their former administrator, who had pocketed money from loans and rents.⁸⁶

As inferred by their accounts, convents were often involved in claims against the properties of heavily indebted individuals who had died owing them thousands of pesos. Convents were very important sources of credit as well as increasingly important buyers of real estate, especially in the eighteenth century. It was predictable that many of these investments went sour. In the litigation over properties with liens owed to several lenders, convents were assigned a ranking place among the suitors of impounded estates to make a claim to their debt, once the debtors’ properties were sold.⁸⁷ The ranking order followed either “antiquity” or volume of the debt. A convent placed near the top of the list could expect to recover its investment if the value of the property was large enough to cover its most important debts. For example, in 1736, La Concepción of Mexico recovered 4,000 pesos from an unredeemed loan to Juan González de Retana, whose properties, under litigation, were sold by the Audiencia.⁸⁸ Examples of economic success and

losses abound in the large number of account books preserved in archival sources.⁸⁹

Other mundane concerns engaged nuns in legal contracts signed with artisans and artists who built altars, paintings, or objects of worship used in the convent. Always seeking to boost ostentation in its altars, La Concepción of Mexico signed a contract with José María Rodallega in June 1788, for the casting and construction of four candleholders and two pedestals, all in silver. He would deliver the objects in November, and had to offer a lien on his house as guarantee of his work. The asking price for the silver work was 6,000 pesos, a large amount of money, and in June he received 2,000 pesos from the abbess in advance for the purchase of the silver and his work.⁹⁰

Financial matters were at the core of conventual ties with the world. As soon as a sister entered the convent, matters of money besieged her. The issue of the dowry has been dealt with earlier, but the next concern was her will, which she had to make to fulfill her vow of poverty. Those who had few, if any, properties often named their parents as successors, but women from families of means separated some of their own inheritance to establish charitable donations to the convent for the celebration of religious feasts, masses for their own souls, or ornaments for the conventual church. They also left money for other women to profess. These personal decisions expressed social networks and family interests or deeply felt faith, and they entailed legal procedures that involved individual nuns with lawyers in the execution of their wills, the destiny of a pious donation, or the yields of properties, even though such obligations were theoretically alien to the reasons that impelled them to enter the convent.

One rather convoluted case involving the abbess of Santa Clara, in Mexico, will illustrate a situation that triggered a legal challenge which the convent was willing to undertake. In 1782, the convent argued before the Audiencia that its abbess, Sor Mariana de San Francisco, was entitled to inherit on an equal footing with city councilor (*regidor*) Don Miguel Francisco de Lugo y Terreros from the estate of Doña Angela Eugenia Calzado y Terreros. Doña Angela had died intestate on December 29, 1779, leaving property valued at 217,692 pesos.⁹¹ Don Miguel Francisco claimed that Sor Mariana was legally incapable of inheriting due to her profession, but Santa Clara demanded that she be considered a legitimate heir so that the convent could receive half of the inheritance. This first legal petition being denied, the convent appealed to the Audiencia. It cited previous legal cases in which nuns had been declared heiresses of *ab in-testato* relatives. It also argued that the convent could own properties and given the state of penury it was experiencing, aggravated by a fire in 1753, it would be very desirable to gain that right. We do not know the outcome of the case, but it is remarkable that convents were willing to argue that renunciation to possessions notwithstanding, nuns remained juridical persons with claims to property. When the welfare of the community, not that of the nun, was at stake, convents found good reasons to focus on their material well-being, even if it meant to go to court and challenge well-established legal practices.

The personal concern for proprietary rights over the material objects that were deemed essential for religious life included the ownership of cells. Discalced nuns boasted of the simplicity of their cells, furnished with the most basic pieces of furniture and devoid of any object of aesthetic value except a crucifix. Occasionally, an opportunity to exercise their vow of poverty became a trial of their patience. Professing in 1612 in the discalced Carmelites of Puebla, Sor Luisa de San Nicolás had to remain in the novitiate for seven years because the convent did not have a cell for her, and she slept in a bed placed in a narrow hall, even though she had brought a large dowry.⁹² Nondiscalced nuns, on the other hand, preferred their comforts, and their desire for a satisfactory space for living is transparent in the petitions for either purchase or construction of cells. The architectural plans of convents varied enormously from one to the other, with the older ones expanding by the purchase of houses that were annexed to the convent to increase their living facilities.⁹³ Real estate within the cloisters was a hot commodity. No sooner had a nun died, than her cell was available for another one, whether recently professed or one searching for a space of her own or even an upgrade of her space. Social class marked the ownership of cells. A poor nun might never own a cell of her own, and could live with another more fortunate sister, if the latter was moved by her charity to share a space in her cell. Sisters of means in less rigorous orders tried to avoid such situations by “purchasing” the right to use the cell in a modified form of long-term lease. The contract often stipulated that the sale was valid for one or several lives, after which the cells would return to the convent.⁹⁴ Sor María de San Pablo, who died in La Concepción, Mexico, in 1698, had a contract to retain ownership for four lives. This meant that she could name the person who could occupy her cell after her death.⁹⁵ In 1673, Joseph de Bustos, a royal accountant, with only 1,000 pesos in hand to pay for the cell of his two sisters, approached the convent of La Concepción to purchase a cell evaluated at 1,300 pesos. The convent accepted his offer, on condition that the sisters would “own” the cell only for the duration of their lives. A similar arrangement was signed by María del Rosario, a professed nun in Jesús María, who in 1734 purchased a cell paid for by her brother, an attorney in the Audiencia. He paid 1,500 pesos in cash, more than the appraised value of the cell, to obtain the right to its use by his own daughters and granddaughters, should they wish to become nuns in the convent. The space for the “cell” measured 16 by 12 varas, and it had four rooms on the ground floor and a hen coop; stairs led to a hall and two more rooms, a bedroom, and an oratory upstairs.⁹⁶ One century later, in the early 1770s, perhaps under the influence of a reformist campaign to enforce observance of *vida común* (common life) in New Spain, the convent allocated, for free, such cells to nuns without means.⁹⁷ Thus, the wealth of some nuns was, in time, enjoyed by others. To a limited extent, this practice was aimed at leveling the sharp social distinctions that existed among nuns,⁹⁸ and it was reinforced by some wealthy nuns who willed “alms” in cash for the poorer sisters of their convent. Most of the time they requested that the recipients pray for their soul, a practice reinforced by the recommendation of the prelates and the abbesses.⁹⁹

The concept of conventual ownership of cells may not have been universally accepted by the nuns themselves. The term “purchased” is found in many legal writs, such as that signed by Manuel de Bustamante y Bustillo when he bought the cell of a deceased nun for his three nieces.¹⁰⁰ When María Vélez de Escalante made her will in 1704, before she professed in La Concepción of Mexico, she disposed of 32,000 pesos and three slaves. Referring to her cell, she said that it was built for her to “live in it as her own” (*cosa propia*). She disposed that it be sold after her death, ordering that the product of the sale be applied for ornaments for the convent.¹⁰¹

Each cell was a small world created by its owner, the place where she sought some comfort in the ownership of objects of devotion and objects of daily use, and from where she knit complicated networks of friendship with other nuns and men and women from el siglo, the outside world, which she had renounced in word, but not in deed. In 1592, Francisco Esino de Figueroa committed himself to pay a dowry of 1,800 pesos for his sister Francisca, who was about to profess in Jesús María. He provided her with the basic furnishings for her cell: a bed, two mattresses, four sheets, a bedcover, two bed pillows and two small pillows or cushions (*acericos*), one rug and a set of tablecloths, one candleholder, 12 dishes, and her full habit.¹⁰² These were basic furnishings, as were those of the cell of Sor Angela Ignacia, a novice in the same convent. She had a chair, two basins, one for washing and the other for food, a candlestick and small scissors to cut the candle wicks, and a bed with its mattress and a canopy and its sheets and pillows.¹⁰³ It is likely that their material possessions increased throughout the years they lived in the convent. An early-eighteenth-century inventory of the cell of Sor María de Has, of La Encarnación, suggests a better-appointed cell. The total worth of her belongings was appreciated in 728 pesos, 4½ reales, and she had 267 pesos in cash at hand. Her habit and other items of wear, as well as her bed, were brand new. In fact, there was a considerable amount of cloth

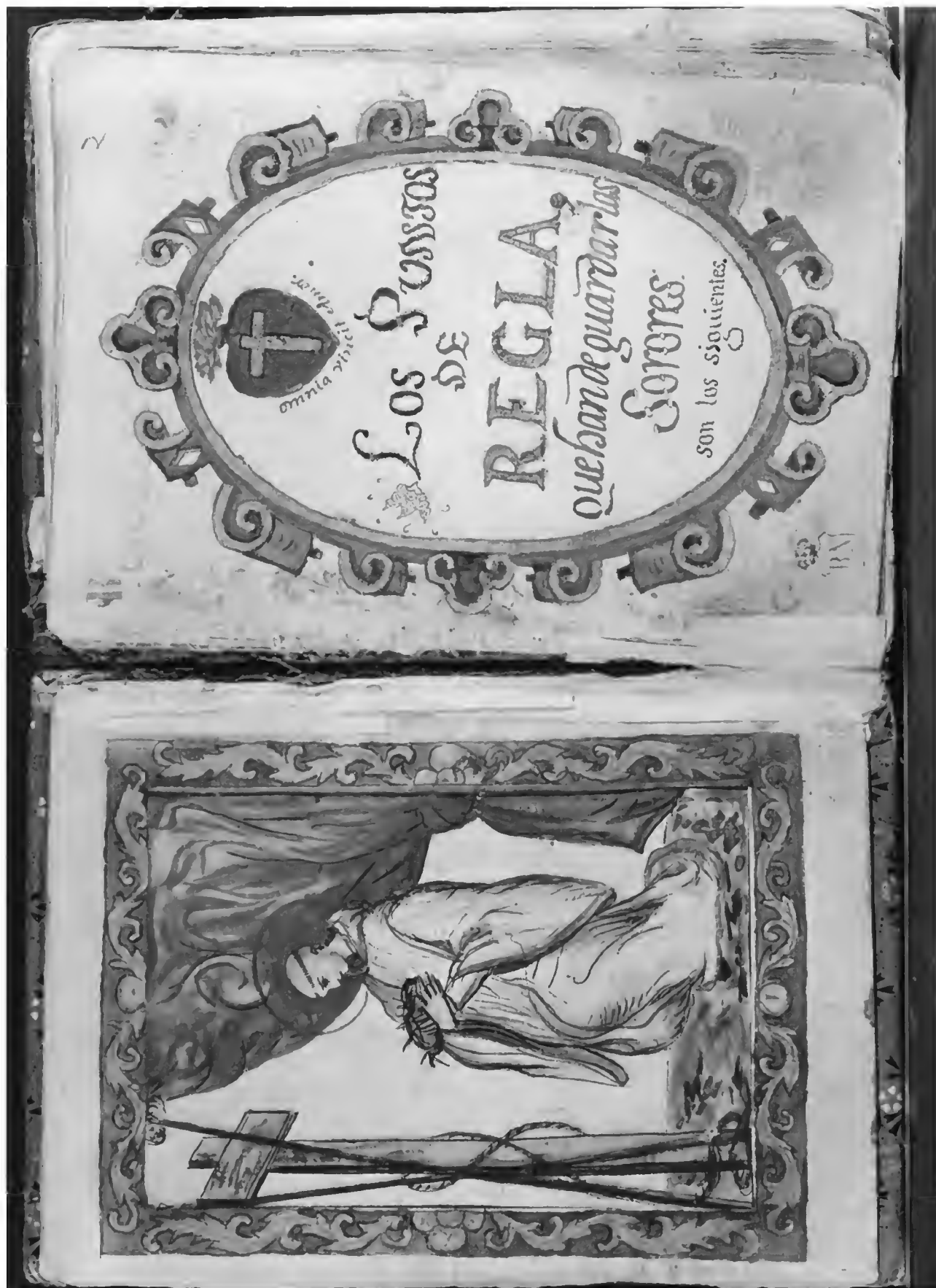
in her possession. She also had, among other things, two desks, several rings and a silver pendant in the image of Our Lady, and a large number of tableware pieces.¹⁰⁴

The material possessions of wealthy nuns were comparable to the holdings of women of a similar status outside. Petronila de San Joseph was a gate keeper (*portera*) in Jesús María at the time of her death in 1687. When her well-appointed cell was inventoried, it turned out to be replete with material possessions and all sorts of bric-a-brac. She owned several sets of china dishes and more than fifty china cups, a variety of desks and fine chests, a well-appointed bed with several sets of covers and blankets, more than one dozen paintings of saints, several reliquaries, nine rings with different gems, and bracelets and necklaces worth more than 100 pesos. Her jewels, silver, and gold pieces were estimated at more than 1,500 pesos. In a contrast determined by class, or perhaps by a decision to live in true monastic poverty, Sor María de San Gregorio, of San Jerónimo, who died in 1692, had only an old habit, a worn-out Breviary, and a few small boxes, one of them for her chocolate.¹⁰⁵ Surprisingly, some nuns died in debt to persons who had lent them money. Manuela Ludovina de San Antonio, of San Bernardo, was not utterly poor if one is to judge by the inventory of her cell, where she kept a small but comfortable number of material goods, including seven birds in their cages. Mother Manuela owed 608 pesos to more than a dozen creditors who had lent her small sums under 80 pesos. Among them were several well-known creditors, such as Juan de Retes, a wealthy entrepreneur. Several creditors held silver objects, small jewels, and tortoise shell in pawn.¹⁰⁶ Among Mother Manuela's debts was a loan for 100 pesos that she had used to pay for the funeral of another sister in religion. How she had used the rest of the borrowed money remains a mystery. In the 1770s, prelates complained that nuns went into debt to pay for religious feasts, but this may not have been the only reason for debts declared at the time of death.

Location within the convent, the age and quality of the construction, and size, determined the price of a cell. When an existing cell was refurbished, or a new one constructed, architects made evaluations of the costs and the plan. The cells where nuns built their own universe of faith and mundane attachments could be simple, single rooms or two-story apartments with several rooms and their own cooking facilities.¹⁰⁷ In 1732, two cells under construction in La Encarnación measured 8 by 16 varas, and 17½ by 16 varas, respectively. These were large by any standard.¹⁰⁸ Large convents had several patios to accommodate cells of such dimensions, although smaller convents with a limited number of professants could not indulge such capacious cells. Sample sale prices for cells range between 200 and 1,000 pesos. Josefa de la Encarnación, of La Encarnación convent, spent over 1,000 pesos on her cell, and in 1736 she requested permission to sell it to another nun, and to donate the proceeds of the sale to pay for masses. Although she had nieces in the convent, they already "owned" their cells and she saw the sale as an opportunity to endow a pious deed.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the sale of the furniture and worldly possessions of some nuns were dedicated to repair conventual altars or to pay for masses.¹¹⁰ If a purchased cell did not meet the expectation of the nun or her family, it could be refurbished. That was the intention of María Teresa de Medina y Saravia, widow of a member of the Order of Calatrava, whose niece was in La Encarnación. The cell had cost only 500 pesos, but she requested permission to make improvements.¹¹¹ For a high-ranking lady the purchase price must have been a bargain, and given the scarcity of cells in such a fashionable convent, the improvements were an investment in comfort and status.

Convents built, sold, and purchased houses for income; they ordered repairs of the older properties and had to maintain the cloister and its church in good living condition. Occasionally, a new church was built or repaired extensively. While architects, builders, masons, and a variety of artisans carried out such work, nuns had to be constantly engaged in overseeing contracts and expenditures, a task that was shared with their majordomos or administrators. In fact, these were time-consuming tasks they had to undertake to ensure the quality of their "home" in this world.

As Alonso Gil so aptly described in 1722, the diversity of class, personal character, and style of life within the conventual walls defied any characterization and demanded the most careful attention for those in charge of ruling them. He did not make any observation on the many activities performed by the nuns to maintain order within their tightly organized female world. It is obvious from the analysis of their daily lives, governance, religious rituals, personal relations among themselves and with their servants, and the desire for creating their own spaces for carrying out their private lives that they did not give up their individuality when they entered the convent. Quite the contrary, it seems that living in a community reaffirmed their desire to retain a significant degree of control over their lives. By exercising their will over personal property, management of the affairs of the convent and servants and elections, they satisfied many of their own personal aspirations as members of the community. In these many activities we see the importance of the marriage between the profane and the divine, as they were the two faces of one reality. Complex as daily life was, there is yet another of its facets that demands attention. All conventual activities assumed nuns in good health, but the frailties of human life and the infirmities of the body were part and parcel of religious life. Their health and the meaning of their bodies in sickness and suffering were important elements in the larger scheme of physical and spiritual realities. This subject will occupy our attention in the next chapter.



Los puntos de la regla que han de guardar las sorores, Hand painting, Manual of instruction for novices written by Sor Manuela de San Antonio of the convent of San Bernardo, Mexico City, 1744.



Portrait of a Nun. Oil on canvas. Profession portrait of Sor Inés Josepha del Corazón de Jesús, who professed in the convent of Santa Teresa la Nueva on June 25, 1756.

Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Robert H. Lamborn Collection.



Profession portrait of Sor María de la Preciosa Sangre de Christo y Puebla. Oil on canvas.

Source: Denver Art Museum, 1998.



Portrait of Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, 18th century. Oil on canvas. She was the most accomplished woman writer of the colonial period. She is wearing a nun's badge depicting the Annunciation.

Source : Philadelphia Museum of Art, Robert H. Lamborn Collection, 1903.



Nuns' badge (Escudos de monja) depicting the coronation of the Virgin Mary. Badges were worn on the chest for special occasions.

Source: Denver Art Museum, 1993.



Christo Confixus, 1804. The concept of being crucified with Christ was deeply embedded in nuns' spirituality.



José Páez, Annunciation and Saints, 1760. Oil on copper. This nun's badge depicts the annunciation of the incarnation of Christ.

Source: Courtesy of the Hispanic Society of America, New York.



Rosa la M. R. M. María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz, fundadora Patrona y Prelada del Convento de la Sagrada Compañía de María Sñla. de la Enseñanza de México. Rosa f.

Portrait of Mother María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz, founder and abbess of the convent of La Enseñanza in Mexico City. Engraving. This was the first convent dedicated to the teaching of girls. The first group of students was received in 1753.

Source: Arizona State University, Rare Books Collection.



Portrait of Sebastiana Josepha de San Agustín, legitimate daughter of Don Matías Alejo Martínez and Doña Thomasa de Dios y Mendiola at age sixteen (1757). This indigenous woman professed as a nun in the convent of Corpus Christi, which was dedicated exclusively to women of the Indian race

. Source: Museo Franz Mayer, Mexico City.



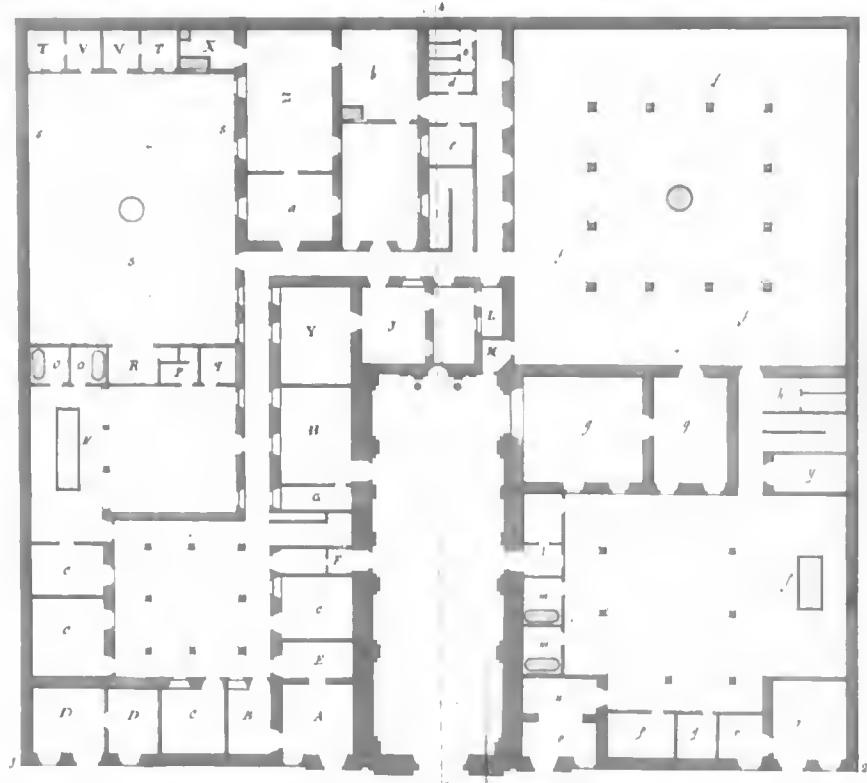
Miguel Cabrera, Capuchin Nun Carrying Food, 1775–1800. Oil on canvas. Idealized portrait of a nun engaged in one of many daily activities in the convent.

Source: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Robert H. Lamborn Collection, 1903.

Proyecto de un convento de Carmelitas descalzas que se intenta construir en la Ciudad de Querétaro.

Explicación del Plano Superior

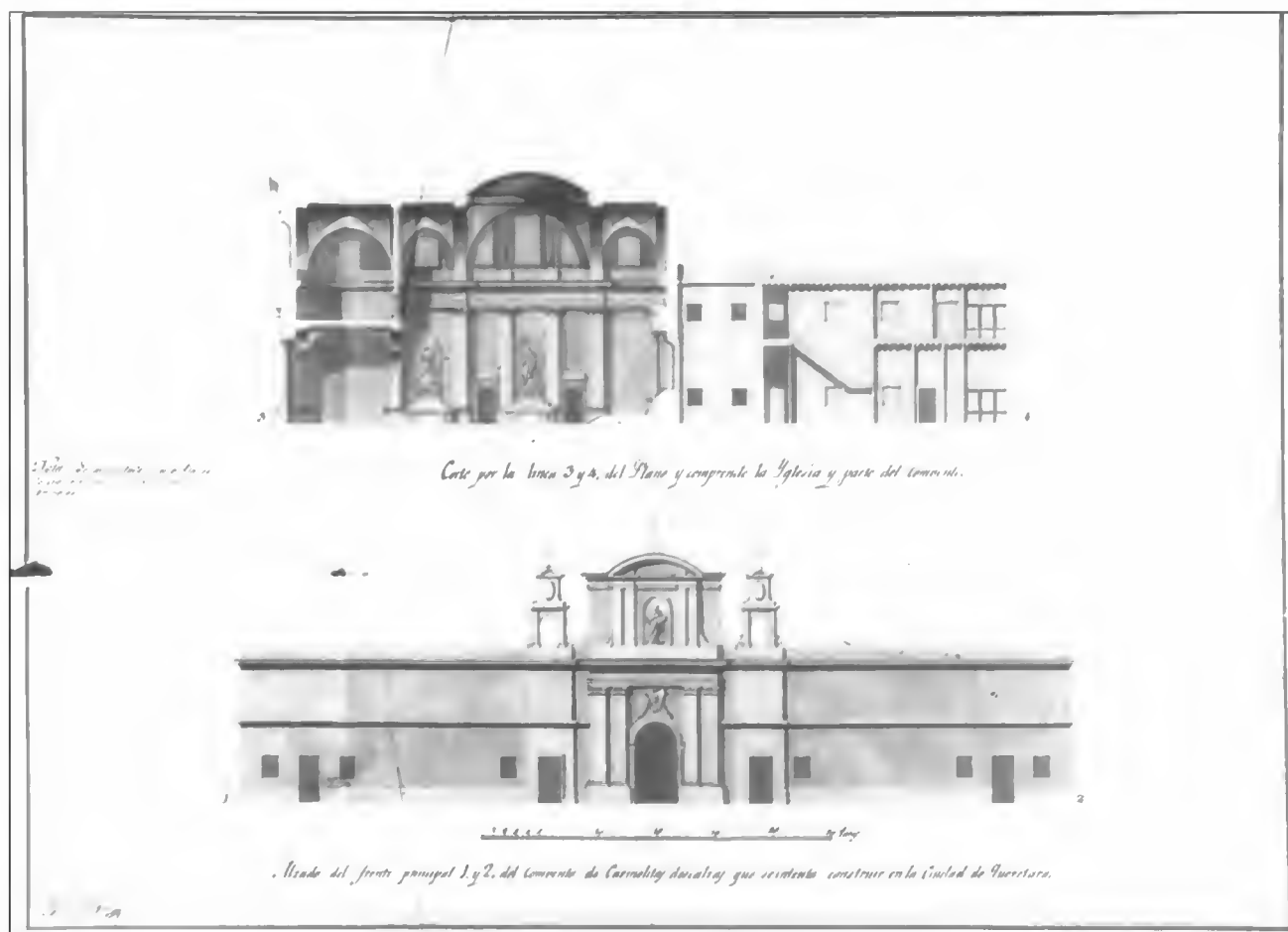
- A. Iglesia
- B. Sala de oratorio
- C. Sala para el coro y para el coro de
- D. Sala para el coro de
- E. Sala
- F. Sala
- G. Sala para el coro de
- H. Sala para el coro de
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- a. Sala de oratorio
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- z. Sala

Plan of the convent of the Discalced Carmelites of the Sweet Name of Jesus in the city of Querétaro. The convent opened in 1805. The large open spaces are one vegetable garden [upper left] and two large processional corridors [right hand-side]. The nave of the church occupies the central space. The nuns' cells were in the upper floor.

Source: National Archive of the Nation, Mexico City.

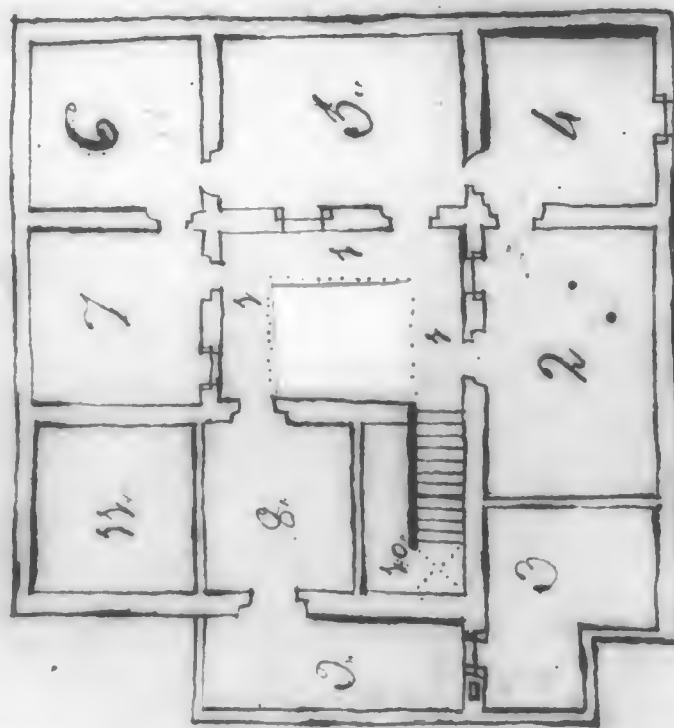


Architect's projection for the façade of the convent of the Discalced Carmelites of the Sweet Name of Jesus in the city of Querétaro, ca 1800.

Source: National Archive of the Nation, Mexico City.

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Quienda a la...



- 1^{ra} corredores descubiertos.
- 2^{na} Sala.
- 3^{na} Decamara
- 4^{ta} Salinet.
- 5^a Quinquena
- 6^a Decamara
- 7^a Cocina
- 8^a Alacena con laberinto
- 9^a Alacena con unanidad y laberinto
- 10^a Sala de la
- 11^a clauo de la comad.

GENERAL ARCHIVE OF THE NATION
MEXICO

Architect's plan of the cells of the Fagoaga family nuns in the convent of Jesús María in Mexico City, 1774. The plan shows the second floor of a complex property with two bedrooms, a sitting room, a studio, a kitchen, an open terrace with flower pots and a laundry area.

Source: General Archive of the Nation, Mexico City.



Kitchen. Convent of Santa Mónica, Puebla.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.



Interior patio, Convent of La Concepción, Puebla. One of several interior patios. Fountains provided water for the convent's needs. Service rooms and cells opened to corridors.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.



Interior patio with nun's cell. Convent of La Concepción, Puebla. Cells of wealthy nuns were like small apartments.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.



Upper and lower coro, Convent of San Jerónimo, Puebla. Nuns gathered behind the grilles of the coros to hear mass, pray, and sing. The lower coro was used in important ceremonies such as professions.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.



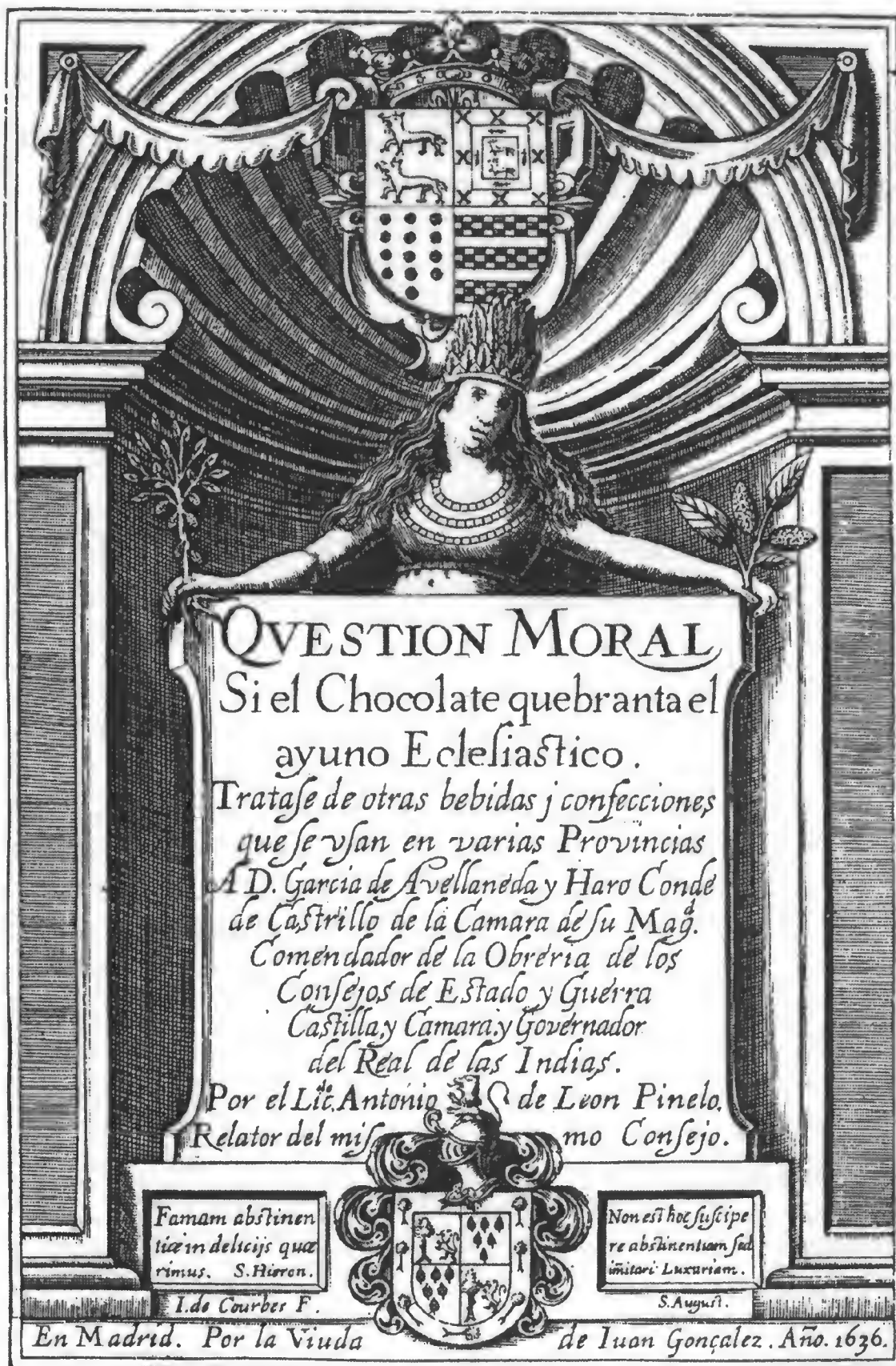
Belfry-Convent of Santa Clara, city of Atlixco. The massive and unadorned tower dominated the convent's church, which was finished in 1642.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.



Below: Convent of Santa Catalina de Siena-Oaxaca. Building sheltering the outdoor laundry facilities where servants washed linen and clothes.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.



Cover page of Antonio de León Pinelo's *Question Moral. Si el Chocolate quebranta el ayuno Eclesiástico*, published in Madrid in 1636. He argued that chocolate did not break the ecclesiastical fast.

**COPIA
DE LA CARTA,**

QUE LA M. R. M.

**JOACHINA MARIA
DE ZA VALETA,**

Abbadesa del Monasterio de SAN PHELIPE
DE JESUS Y POBRES CAPUCHINAS de esta
Imperial Ciudad de Mexico,

ESCRIBE

A las M. RR. MM. Preladas de los demas
Monasterios, dandoles noticia de las heroycas
Virtudes, y dichosa muerte

DE LA M. R. M.

**AUGUSTINA
NICOLASA MARIA**

DE LOS DOLORES MUÑOZ Y SANDOVAL,
Abbadesa, que fue, tercera vez del refe-
rido Monasterio.

CON LICENCIA DE LOS SUPERIORES

En la Imprenta nueva de la Bibliotheca Mexicana, enfrente de
San Augustin, año de 1755.

Cover page of the biography of Mother Joachina Maria de Zavaleta, abbess of the Capuchins of San Felipe de Jesús, Mexico City, written by Mother Augustina Nicolasa María and published in Mexico City in 1755.

Source: Photograph by Asunción Lavrin.

CHAPTER SIX

Body, Soul, and Death

“Our Lord gave her a long and grave sickness, to strengthen and purify her, throughout which she gave a great example of patience. She prepared herself with great devotion to receive the Sacred Sacraments, and having received them, gave her soul to the Lord, in great confidence of her salvation.”



The relationship between body and soul, as perceived by colonial nuns, determined several elements of their devotional practices and their reaction to sickness and death as part of a world in which the expression of spirituality and the connection with the divine occurred through the corporality of the body. Traditional interpretations of the relationship between body and soul assume that medieval and early modern nuns believed in the dual nature of flesh and spirit as propounded by the early fathers of the Christian faith, such as Saint Augustine. The body pulled toward earthly material cares and was an obstacle to the full achievement of spiritual freedom and the eventual union with God. Taming the body's desires and inflicting pain on the flesh helped strengthen the spirit in its dialectic confrontation with the lower instincts of all humans.¹ Carolyn Bynum argues that medieval asceticism as practiced by medieval women was not based in this kind of dualism, and that women saw in the body a means to experiment with ways of coming closer to God in an *imitatio Christi* that included both body and soul, making their bodies “parallel to the consecrated wafer on the altar and the man on the cross.”² One of the most widely read seventeenth-century theologians in the Spanish-speaking world, Miguel Godínez, tied the states of the soul to the humors of the body and provided an analytical tool to understand one's own ability to subdue the body to the will of the spirit.³ For him the spirit mirrored the condition of the body, but this did not mean an antagonistic relationship because the body was a venue of the spirit, and despite its corporeal basis, as an instrument it could be made to follow the spirit. Whether one adopts a traditional or a revisionist interpretation, there is no doubt that the relationship between body and soul remained one of the greatest preoccupations of male and female religious in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mexico. Whether the body was healthy or sick, its condition had a spiritual meaning that influenced the understanding of sickness and its treatment as well as death itself. Sickness demanded a theological response evocative of its ultimate explanation as the will of God. Pain and discomfort were part of religious life as a form of imitating Jesus Christ's own suffering and were accepted without question. Ultimately, death would liberate the spirit and allow those who had been truthful to God to enjoy his presence in Heaven. In cases of willful adoption of penitential practices, some nuns referred to the body as “el bruto” or the untamed one that had to be tamed, while others offered its punishment as a means to honor Christ.

The complex intertwining of body, soul, sickness, and death expressed itself in daily life through the administration of health care in the convent, as well as in the rituals involving death and the ultimate meaning of the end of life itself; and fasting and flagellation as voluntary offerings which used the body, because in so doing they remembered the mortality of God made flesh. By looking into how sickness was viewed and treated by nuns, what resources were used to cope with disease and death, and the practices carried out by professed women to control their own bodies in the pursuit of perfection, we share some of the most intimate and intensely lived aspects of religious life. The final resolution of life in death meant more than the end of physical suffering. It meant further suffering for the purification of the soul in Purgatory and eventually its ultimate elevation to Heaven and the vision of God. After death, parts of the body could acquire spiritual meaning as relics, while visions of the departed could send messages of comfort and salvation to the living. Therefore, by addressing these themes we gain knowledge of the multilayered meaning of the body for the brides of Christ as the cradle of the spirit, and a venue to imitate Christ.

DISEASE AND CARE

Any discussion of the meaning of sickness to colonial nuns should consider what was understood as “health” or healthful, but sources dealing with conventual life fail to discuss those conditions. Conventual Rules paid attention only to sickness and how to treat the sick. The concept of “health” resulting from a set of rules followed to prevent disease, or an understanding of measures that would preserve the body in good condition, was not part of colonial nuns' mental outlook, even though they knew what it was to be in good health as opposed to being sick, and understood that some practices could harm the body. Health, like sickness, was a great concern of all religious, because it was providential.⁴ Whenever nuns wrote to their prelates they wished them health, a precious and fortuitous happening, because health and sickness were beyond human will as an expression of God's will.

Urban life in the period between 1550 and 1800 was marked by unavoidable contacts with pathogenic elements, ineffective control of hygiene, and ignorance of the cause of diseases. In Mexico City the frequent inundations of the city, especially that of 1629, created pools of stagnant waters in convents located in low areas of the city, which remained under water for long periods of time.⁵ Since there were no systems of waste disposal, black waters and garbage were difficult to control and were disposed in the streets. As a result, rats abounded in the convents.⁶ We will never know how infectious diseases were transmitted *in locus*, but the recurrent *pestes* or epidemics experienced in convents are evidence that the isolation created by enclosure did not guarantee protection from cholera, typhus, or bubonic plague. Human traffic in the receiving rooms and parlor of the convent was clearly one venue for disease transmission. Once a focus of infection rooted in the convent, enclosure could make it worse. For example, in 1597 an epidemic ravaging the city of Mexico did not stop at the doors of the convent of Jesús María, where its chronicle stated many nuns died.⁷ The concern about contagion was high in the minds of the nuns, who saw many flare-ups of small pox, typhus, and plague taking the lives of their sisters.⁸ In 1633, a plague hit Santa Catarina de Sena, in Mexico City, and its chronicler, Fr. Alonso Franco, states that sixty persons fell ill and twenty-four died. It is

unclear if they were all nuns and it is possible that servants were also victims.⁹ The illustrious Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz died possibly of typhus or plague contracted as she took care of other nuns affected by the same disease in a contagious spell in her convent of San Jerónimo.¹⁰

The fact that epidemics invaded the cloisters did not indicate that they were dirty or ill-attended. Cleanliness of the premises was part of the routine of daily life. Despite lack of knowledge of the causes of diseases, colonial nuns and their contemporaries were conscious of the basic need for cleanliness in the convent. Rosalva Loreto has shown that the convents of Puebla were founded in areas with access to water, which they shared with the adjacent community.¹¹ Water was delivered via a water channel for only several hours a day or a fixed number of days a week, and was stored for daily use. Servants worked hard to keep the common areas clean, and water was a precious element in daily life, largely for drinking, washing, and cooking. In the kitchen, special care was taken of its utensils, but no official mention is ever made of the state of the latrines. Conventual discipline mandated clean clothes. In convents living under a communal or semi-communal rule, the washing, ironing, and mending of the nuns' habits was the responsibility of lay nuns and servants. Personal hygiene, on the other hand, was a matter of choice.¹² How often did nuns bathe or wash their hair? The Augustinian Rules written by Juan Bautista Méndez established that hair should be cut and washed seven times a year, although some flexibility in the frequency was allowed to suit different "complexions."¹³ Hair was cut short less as a concern for cleanliness than to avoid any feminine pride or vanity. The Rules for the Dominican nuns stipulated that frequent baths should be avoided unless medically prescribed for the sake of the nun's health, but they ought not to be a daily occurrence due to the possibility of deriving "pleasure" from it.¹⁴ Avoiding seeing the body prevented any sinful thoughts.¹⁵ Sor María de Jesús Felipa, living in San Juan de la Penitencia in the mid-eighteenth century, gives us a rare glimpse of a bath session in her convent, as she was the object of a practical joke when she prepared the bath for one of her sisters.¹⁶ To tease her, another nun put a turtle in the tub and asked her to try the water's temperature. Sor María nearly had a fit because she was very afraid of animals, but after recovering she proceeded to help with the bathing task.

Another element of importance in caring for the body was an adequate diet, but food was also the subject of theological concern and the object of restrictions to prevent the sin of gluttony and attachment to the pleasures of the flesh.¹⁷ Fasting was incorporated into the discipline of controlling the body and observed during canonically prescribed days in remembrance of the suffering of the Lord. Further and potentially dangerous abuse of the body was incurred through self-flagellation, which honored the pain of Christ and also served to purge the body from sin. Excessive fasting and/or self-flagellation could weaken a nun's health but were considered essential practices of a devout life. Thus, health and sickness were not opposite terms but interlocking realities. A sick body could strengthen the soul and, conversely, spiritual sickness could result from much attention to the body.

In general, sickness was regarded as a trial of one's patience by God, to be suffered as part of his omniscient plan for testing a person's mettle. A Capuchin daily prayer addressed Jesus as "my physician" (*mi médico*), and the spiritual embodiment of Jesus as a healer of soul and flesh was part of a nun's belief that whatever concerned the health of her body or her spirit was in the hands of God.¹⁸ They accepted physical discomfort and suffering long before calling a physician, relying instead upon remedies provided by a local apothecary or the convent's own pharmacy to promote healing. Even confessors were sought for medical counseling, as was the case of Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, who asked for the advice of her confessor on whether or not she should call a doctor to address her medical problems.¹⁹ As women, nuns had strong inhibitions about exposing their bodies to a male physician, and hesitated before calling one. Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio, a seventeenth-century nun in the convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla, confessed how embarrassed she was about exposing her legs and thighs to the doctors, and how she sublimated her feelings by thinking about the nudity of Christ when he suffered the beatings preceding his Passion.²⁰ Medical examinations were undertaken when sickness became a desperate battle for life. Often, they occurred too late to stop the course of the disease, and the remedies were frequently painful and ineffective. Given the shortcomings and pitfalls of medical knowledge before the nineteenth century, a doctor's advice and his medications may have been as detrimental to the patient's health as the failure to consult him.

Access to medical help within conventual enclosure was limited to a select number of physicians registered with the convent. Archbishops and bishops drew a list of those physicians allowed to enter each convent, barring all others.²¹ Only extreme sickness could give the abbess grounds to call for the assistance of physicians, bleeders, and "barbers." In their desire to preserve the purity of enclosure, zealous prelates could worsen the availability of medical contact. In 1709, the Franciscan Provincial in charge of the convent of Santa Clara, in the town of Carrion (known as Santa Clara de Atrixco), gave the nuns a set of rules to "correct" improprieties reported on the physicians' visit to the sick. He reiterated the order that a nun must accompany the doctors or bleeders as they entered as well as throughout the medical visitation with the sick nun. To this he added the prohibition of engaging in conversation with any physician, bleeder, or any other health professional in the halls or at the entrance of the enclosure. He reported having heard how some of them loitered around (*vagueando*) the convent grounds, giving advice on all sorts of sickness, sometimes "beyond their professional abilities." He told the nuns that a "sickness" of their conscience could result from these conversations, which were instigated by the "common enemy," the Devil.²² This prelate's order suggested that once they were inside the convent to see a patient, doctors or bleeders were consulted by other nuns about their many medical problems. By forbidding these consultations the prelate made medical advice to nuns even more difficult.²³

Sickness might not be merely to be suffered, but also to be desired. Cloistered women, prevented from carrying out apostolic work, envisioned sickness as their option to suffer for the glory of God as saints and martyrs. The suffering generated by sickness was never comparable to that suffered by Christ, but it was a form of repaying his sacrifice for humanity. Fighting a disease could mean fighting the will of God. Thus, disease had to run its course, since only God's grace could cure. Feeling herself very close to death during a grave bout with disease, María Magdalena Lorravaquio heard a voice telling her that her hour had not yet come because she had yet much more to suffer in life. She recovered and praised God not for her health, but for the chance to suffer more.²⁴ While doctors were often puzzled about symptoms, diagnoses, and treatment, nuns ascribed "cures" to miraculous interventions.²⁵

While sickness was a venue to enhance spirituality, personal and conventual discipline demanded that, in sickness, care be sought and given with charity and love. A well-known eighteenth-century book of advice for nuns recommended the essential steps a sick sister should follow. Having received the blessing of her abbess to seek medical care, she should follow the doctor's advice, and if he sent her to the infirmary, she should confess first. "The purification of the conscience is . . . an efficacious remedy for some diseases."²⁶ Confession would ensure that in case of death she was cleansed spiritually and in the grace of God. She should put her cell in order, so that if called by the Lord her sisters could pick up where her life ended. Papers not relevant to her religious life should be burned. After this, she would retreat to her sick bed and ask that prayers be said for her if she could not pray herself. Once under treatment, she should submit to doctors and nurses armed with "Christian patience." In this carefully designed set of steps, attention to body and spirit were understood as being in perfect harmony and equally important, especially when the view of death as a possibility was in sight.

Like the rest of the population, nuns suffered from a variety of maladies, such as tumors, blindness, gout, pneumonia, nervous spasms, uterine inflammation, herpes, and dementia. Body pain described as *dolor de costado*, or pain on the side of the body, acute stomach pain, fevers, seizures, and similar symptoms could be signs of many different diseases. A sensation of inordinate “heat in the chest” and lack of breath could indicate heart disease, but in the hagiographical narrative these symptoms were associated with visions and likened to the transverberation of Teresa of Avila, when her heart was pierced by the love of God during a mystic ecstasy. A malady popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was dropsy (*hidropesía*) or water retention (edema), often caused by kidney or heart disease. It was described as an unusual amount of blood circulating in the body that could “choke” the patient, and it was treated with bleedings. Eighteenth-century Franciscan Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad describes in her writings how her body was often “hot” and ached, and how she suffered frequent headaches. She was diagnosed with dropsy. Prior to her profession she was a resident at Nuestra Sra. de Belén recogimiento for poor women. There, she suffered from typhus (*tabardillo*) and was given the final sacraments of the dead, but was lucky enough to recover. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz also suffered from that disease as a young professed nun, and is the only nun known to mention it in one of her poems.²⁷

Biographical materials afford some clues to other short- or long-term diseases. Sor Isabel de San Gregorio, of Santa Clara of Atrisco, had “a bleeding ulcer or cancer that covered her body from the throat to the waist, which ‘ate’ her chest.”²⁸ Sor Ana de San Bernardo, of Santa Clara, Puebla, had painful tumors on the soles of her feet.²⁹ Sor Ana de San Francisco, of Santa Catalina de Sena in Mexico, was reported to have a tumor in her tongue.³⁰ Capuchin founder Sor Mariana J. Nepomuceno died of dysentery and erysipelas.³¹ Open sores, bad teeth, and small tumors in the skin were the problems affecting Sor Antonia de San Jacinto, a Clare nun in Querétaro.³² Sor Elvira de San Pedro, of the same convent, was a sickly young woman when she professed; nevertheless, she was allowed to take her vows, and afterwards she recovered miraculously, an important element in the hagiographic narrative. Yet, at the end of her life she suffered from sciatica and one of her legs shrank, possibly due to muscular atrophy. This did not prevent her dutiful attendance at choir prayers. Her sister in religion, Sor Ana de Jesús, one of the founders of the Carmelites in Puebla, suffered from asthma and constant coughing.³³

The naming and description of such diseases by hagiographers or the nuns themselves did not have a medical objective. It was the spiritual element of disease as a source of desirable suffering that was stressed in their construction of iconic sick and suffering model nuns. Franciscan Agustín de Vetancurt praised Sor Ana de San Bernardo, of Santa Clara in Puebla, for having carried “her pain with a joyful spirit.” Sor Ana de la Ascensión, who professed in 1612, died in 1672 after sixty years as a religious, being “very patient with the sickness that the Lord gave her for over thirty years.”³⁴ José Gómez de la Parra, chronicler of the Pueblan Carmelites, narrated how one of the founders burned an arm and suffered acute pain and painful remedies with “peaceful serenity” and patience.³⁵ For their part, nuns’ own vision of their suffering expressed similar sentiments. Throughout the many years of her sickness Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio, of San Jerónimo, who suffered from the violent cures applied to her, regarded her medical problems as a means to find great inner strength and imitate Christ. Such spiritual *imitatio* was essential to withstand the onslaught of disease and medical treatments. In her own words, she transformed her pain in “enjoyment and happiness because I compared them to those my redeemer had experienced in the cross for my sins.” She meditated on the stages of the Passion of Christ and prayed to God who “communicated to me many kind and amorous affections.”³⁶ This special relationship with God buffered her from her bodily miseries and strengthened her spiritual commitment. Divine will caused her suffering but also provided consolation. Thus understood, disease was a means of purification and accessory to spiritual life.

While the medical identification of the diseases suffered by the nuns is of historical importance, the biographers’ descriptions of diseases is just as important, to understand how it was interpreted by the writers as well as the readers of the biographies. To underline the spiritual content of disease and suffering, biographers engaged in a metaphorical exploration of the sick body of nuns. They described with special interest the devastation and the suffering of the flesh, thus invading a territory that would have been otherwise totally forbidden to them: the bodies of the brides of Christ. Describing in dark colors the details of their diseases, they intended to inspire sympathy from the reader and extol the equanimity of the suffering nun as an inspirational point of meditation. Once the body was diagnosed as sick by the chronicler or biographer, it was exposed in the same manner that the body of Christ’s semi-nudity on the cross was exposed to all without embarrassment. Pain, suffering, and disease conferred on the flesh the sanctity of the Christian passion and writing about it had a highly didactic purpose. The baroque pen of Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios reached peaks of extravagance as he described the sickness endured by Sor Isabel de la Encarnación, a Pueblan Carmelite. “She had an abscess on the lumbar region, on the inside of her back that caused her intense and insufferable pain.” No medication could cure that abscess, which caused sickness in the rest of her body “in such way that putrid and pestilent matter of a green-black color came through her mouth and other parts, creating abscesses over the throat and chest and leaving all interior areas corrupted and full of tumors.” She also suffered from:

pain in her sides, from her urine, in her lungs, side, heart, ears, stomach, jaws, and teeth, with inflammation of the liver and spleen, suffering also from pain in the back, arms, feet and hands. There was no joint in her body that did not suffer from the scourge of similar torments, which she customarily had in her forehead, eyes, and head, with interminable cold and fever, and such copious sweats resulting from such bad humors that prevailed in the convent that she eventually became lame and bent and unable to move.³⁷

Thus, he reduced her body to a catalog of awe-inspiring pictures of decomposition that must have moved the readers either to tears or fear. That was precisely his intent. In doing so, he disclosed her body to the curiosity of the readers in such intimate manner as to being shocking. The body so carefully hidden below yards of habit and veils, so far removed from the gaze of other persons, especially men, was mercilessly exposed to serve the cause of extolling the virtues of the religious spirit.

The few examples of medical treatment cited in available sources refer to purges, bleedings, heat treatments, and some surgical procedures. The latter were given without the benefit of anesthetics, which were unknown in that period. Several operations were reported in Santa Catarina de Sena. Two of them were performed on Sor Ana de San Francisco. The first was in the stomach, for reasons not stated, and the second for a “tumor” on the tongue.³⁸ Two other examples of medical treatments undergone by nuns are worth exploring, to understand how the reality of disease and the perception of religious beliefs intertwined in their lives. Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio, mentioned before, was in bed for the best part of forty-four years, suffering from a variety of illnesses that her doctors did not know how to treat. For a throat condition (*mal de garganta*) the remedies they applied caused her ulcers, from which she suffered for a long time. She was prescribed “sweats” and “unctions” and when these did not have any effect, her doctors applied heat on the crown of her head, a treatment that, in her words, put her “in great danger of losing my mind.” Then she began to suffer from

uncontrollable shaking. This caused “awe and admiration” in the doctors. They had a meeting and after trying several ineffective “cures,” they decided to scarify her thighs and legs. The doctors had determined that she was “*ensogada*” or full of mercury (*azogue*) and applied heated knives to the cuts in her extremities. This treatment was “so rigorous that in this martyrdom I felt great pains and suffering.”³⁹ Since the cures did not abate her shakes and she seemed to be bearing them with stoicism, praying and saying some things in Latin, the religious authorities decided that perhaps the Devil was in her body. She was examined by a confessor named Dr. Cárdenas who, after public and private conversations with the nun, determined she was not possessed and remained as her confessor for several years. Although she experienced great spiritual relief with him, the shaking of the body returned. Her abbess decided to try her own cure and prescribed whippings with a rope, which were applied “with great rigor.” The abbess also determined that Sor María Magdalena should not take communion. She was held as “demented” and was not encouraged to confess, despite her confessor’s protests. Her decision lasted for over one year until a new abbess was elected and lifted the order. The new abbess allowed her only occasional confessions and communions, causing Sor María Magdalena considerable psychological distress.

Puebla’s notable eighteenth-century spiritual writer, Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, suffered her last sickness between March and April 1755, when she began experiencing a cold and pain. Her physician diagnosed “dropsy,” advising bleeding as a relief. She lost a significant volume of blood, and he was pleased because this meant that “her vases had been very full.”⁴⁰ As her weakness and pain in arms and legs continued, they were diagnosed as the result of the nervous failure produced by the harshness of her penitential practices. The pain obliged her to use crutches and eventually she took to her bed. The doctor predicted she would lose the ability to move her limbs, especially since she had had a bad fall two years before. She lost her appetite, was short of breath (*aho-gos*), had aneurisms on both sides of her neck; and suffered from headaches, convulsive movements of the body, and thirst. The doctor had recommended that she drink very little water on account of her “dropsy.”

By early February 1756, Sor María Anna had lost her ability to speak, although she later recovered some of it. She is also said to have had a number of “tumors” and sores full of liquid all over her body. Doctors prescribed that two chicken breasts be applied to her wrists, a treatment lacking in scientific explanation and closer to “folk” medicine, but apparently regarded as helpful. She also had applications of heat on her stomach, one of which burned her badly. A cupping glass was applied to one foot, and it caused an open sore that never closed. A nursing nun administered “caustics” (heat treatments). She died on February 15, 1756, at age sixty, despite “all medical attention,” but possibly a victim of too much of it.⁴¹ Bleeding, ointments, purges, and drinks made with vegetables and roots were the most common medications, although sometimes the folkloric prescription of pieces of lamb, a dead chicken, or a religious relic were applied to the body in the hope of obtaining a cure.⁴² The detailed account of Sor María Anna’s symptoms and treatments illustrates how her biographer exposed the anguish and pain of her body and her suffering as an example of spirituality and a lesson on patience and piety for his readers. She was an exemplary nun and her suffering was equally exemplar.

The medicines ordered by the convents from their pharmacists reflect the nature of contemporary pharmacopoeia. In the two years between 1586 and 1588, the convent of Jesús María had spent nearly 2,000 pesos in medicines, a rather large sum that suggests that medications were expensive but not spared by the convent. Among them were almond oil, linseed oil, a substance described as “worm oil” (*aceite de lombrices*), and syrups and purges consisting of diaphinicon in various amounts.⁴³ Twenty years later, in 1610, the medicines still consisted largely of purges, ointments, and pills. On June 30, 1610, the invoice for the medicines provided to Jesús María amounted to 258 pesos, 7 reales. They consisted largely of vegetable compounds made with rhubarb, cilantro, sarsaparilla, sour almonds, rose juice, sugarcane pulp dissolved in borage water, mastic powder, poppy seeds, cooling ointments and orange-flower ointments, “golden pills” (*pildoras áureas*), and occasionally, rum alcohol and pulque mixed with other ingredients.⁴⁴ In the mid-seventeenth century, the convent of San Bernardo bought borage water for its sick, and three arrobas (75 lbs.) of roses, “to make water and ointment for the sick.”⁴⁵ Obviously, these remedies were more palliatives than effective cures. In 1743 the convent of Regina Coeli had spent 273 pesos in the infirmary for the purges, bleeding, and attention to the “habitually” sick nuns. Medical treatment had changed very little within the conventual walls throughout the century, and some nuns simply lived with chronic ailments of one kind or the other.⁴⁶ To compensate for the debilitation of the body, food for the sick was rich in proteins and special attention was given to pleasing the palate of the sick and strengthening them. Between 1762 and 1753, Santa Clara of Atrixco bought a special fat for seasoning called *unto*, and a herd of pigs, lard, sugar, iced water, sheep, chickens, eggs, *aguardiente* (sugarcane spirits), and white wine to feed the sick. The pharmacy provided dry seeds (*pepitas*), raisins, pine nuts, and cinnamon. Wood for a *temescal* (vapor baths) suggests that they had adopted the steam bath treatments of indigenous roots.⁴⁷

We have seen before how some spiritual advisors told nuns to put themselves confidently in the hands of doctors and nurses when they were very sick. On the other hand, others concerned with internal discipline admonished against allowing nuns with “habitual diseases” from exempting themselves from their daily religious duties. Unless very sick, they were expected to follow their daily routines.⁴⁸ When Sor Marina de la Cruz, of the convent of Jesús María, had a premonition of her death, she checked herself into the infirmary, but she knew it was not a cure she sought, but “eternal health.” There she received the attentions of the saddened and teary nuns, with “the charity ministered in such occasions” although they would not stop her death.⁴⁹ The Rules and Constitutions of some Orders prescribed service in the infirmary as an important part of religious life. Nurses provided food (sometimes cooked in the infirmary itself) and administered medications, changed linens, and prayed for the sick in the spirit of charity. Nurses were appointed or elected by the community, and the main concern of some prelates was that they should have some vocation for nursing and caring.⁵⁰ However, these nurses were not specialists, and in some cases their service was personal and voluntary. Although conventual Rules stipulated the maintenance of an infirmary, many sick nuns preferred to stay in their cells, attended by servants or sisters in religion, and convents made provisions for those too sick to leave their own cells.⁵¹

All convents employed an outside staff of health professionals that included a doctor or physician (*médico*), a surgeon (*cirujano*), a “barber” or phlebotomist, and a *boticario* or pharmacist, who either visited the sick or prepared their medications. These professionals received an annual fixed compensation that was much higher than the stipend paid to any other service purveyor except the majordomo or administrator. The general report on female conventual finances carried out in Mexico City, in 1744, provides an overview of stipends for services paid to the health professionals the year before. La Encarnación paid 100 pesos to the master surgeon and 150 pesos to the physician. Santa Catalina de Sena paid 150 to the physician and 80 pesos to the surgeon, while San Jerónimo paid 110 pesos to the physician and 110 pesos to a barber-surgeon. On the other hand, the physician, surgeon, and barber rendering services to a convent of limited resources, such as Santa Teresa la Antigua, received no payment (*curan por caridad*). They were given a token gratuity of 25 pesos at Christmas. Physicians and surgeons seem to be in the same rank of payment and esteem, while the other services were paid less.⁵²

The boticario or pharmacist had the strongest ties to the convent and was ready to provide medications at all times. In general, the cost of running the infirmary was not included in the sum paid to the pharmacist. Arrangements for his services varied according to the convent. In the sixteenth century the

pharmacist of Jesús María sent separate bills for all medicines prepared. In the mid-eighteenth century pharmacists had contracts with convents for a lump sum that secured their services and payment. At that time, they were receiving sums between 300 and 350 pesos annually, although some received more. José Fernández Méndez charged San Lorenzo 400 pesos for medicines provided to its forty-eight nuns in 1743. In that year, Regina Coeli also budgeted for errand boys who would carry the medicines between the pharmacy and the convent. They collected 52 pesos annually.

FASTING AND FLAGELLATION

Writing on Sor Melchora de la Asunción, José Gómez de la Parra, chronicler of the Carmelites of Puebla, said that “since she was a young girl she exercised the penitence of cilicios, [corporal] discipline and fasting and thus, in religion, she embraced with fervent will ordinary and extraordinary mortifications.” Fasting, flagellation, and the use of cilicios were the trilogy of penitence that all nuns made part of their religious observance.⁵³ Cilicios were devices made of rope or metal that were worn on the bare skin under the habits, and caused discomfort or pain (*mortificación*) to the bearer. While such practices were common and records attest to their use, only extreme cases are cited by biographers and nuns’ own autobiographies as exemplary cases worth noting. Certitude about the causal relationship between them and the incidence of sickness cannot be established in each particular case.

Fasting, the voluntary abstention from food, was compulsory in preparation for a number of feasts during Lent, Advent, and the Vigils of some saints’ days. As prescribed by the church, fasting meant a twenty-four-hour abstention from food, from midnight to midnight, but with the right to eat a light meal at noon and some liquids throughout the day so as to prevent harming the body’s health. Fasting was used to cleanse one’s sins or even the sins of others and imitate Christ in his patience and suffering. It was a free and voluntary offering. Fasting beyond boundaries prescribed by the church required permission of the confessors. Advent and Lent were the two most important canonical fasting periods of the year. Fridays and Saturdays were also days of fasting, as were the Vigils of some important feasts, such as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (August 15), All Saints (October 31), and Saint John the Baptist (June 23).⁵⁴ For some very special occasions such as Tuesday and Friday during the Holy Week, fasting meant bread and water only. Regular fasting during several key days in special weeks was customary in some convents which followed their own Rule to guide themselves. The abbess was in charge of enforcing fasting as prescribed by the Rules, but she also had the authority to order weak or old nuns not to follow the fasting in full rigor because their bodies’ fragility demanded food as a form of medicine.

While fasting has a long history in Christianity, New World spirituality and observance faced a peculiar quandary over the use of some new foods autochthonous to the area. Chocolate was one of them, and the most contentious part of the diet of members of the church. In pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, drinking chocolate was a privilege of the nobility. After the conquest and throughout the sixteenth century chocolate beverages became accessible to all. Europeans added sugar, and several spices, including chile in New Spain. It was a very popular drink, albeit not inexpensive. In Mexico everybody who could afford it drank chocolate.⁵⁵ However, its popularity was not without problems. Since pre-Columbian times chocolate had been considered a morally ambiguous drink leading to lust. As such, the issue was whether it was an appropriate drink for religious persons. If it was acceptable, did it break the fasts prescribed by the church? To break prescribed fasts by eating a significant amount of forbidden food was a mortal sin. Thus, two key questions were raised on the use of chocolate. Was it food or a drink, and, was it appropriate for female and male religious to indulge in it? The latter question was a moot point given the high rate of consumption among nuns and male religious who shared the dietary habits of the population at large. Obviously, religious men and women did not consider it an aphrodisiac. However, the first point—on fasting—demanded theological clarification. It was adroitly analyzed in a lengthy treatise by Antonio de León Pinelo, a notable Peruvian-born jurist, essayist, and moralist. After reviewing many authorities, he deemed chocolate was a drink capable of alleviating some health problems such as asthma, colic, gas, ulcers, heart problems, and bad humors. As a drink with medical benefits, chocolate was declared not to break the fast.⁵⁶ Thus, it was permissible to use it in moderate amounts not leading to gluttony. Priests could confidently advise that drinking a thinned form of chocolate not too heavy on the sugar was permissible during the period of fasting.

Chocolate was also the drink offered to all conventual visitors during their official business. Whether as a social or a medical beverage, chocolate was an indulgence without which some nuns would feel “deprived.” In Puebla convents, there was a room called *el chocolatero* across the lower choir. As soon as the nuns left the coro after their early prayers they took their chocolate, handed out by servants or lay sisters. They also had an afternoon chocolate hour during the break after Rosary prayer. San Jerónimo, in Puebla, placed its chocolatero on the second floor, close to the infirmary, to make the beverage accessible to the sick.⁵⁷ Conversely, strict Orders, such as the Carmelites, formally renounced chocolate at profession to differentiate themselves from the rest of the Orders. By the mid-eighteenth century, though, some Carmelites began to profess without such vow, which implied that they could drink it if they chose to.⁵⁸

Fasting, however, was about more than abstaining from chocolate. In its “heroic” mode, as described in the biographies of exceptional nuns, it took a spiritual meaning that affected the body in a very direct manner. The best proof of spiritual achievement was a body that suffered the affliction of hunger and deprivation with love and humility. New World nuns had models of fasting in the lives of medieval female saints, among whom Catherine of Siena was perhaps the favorite in New Spain throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁹ Medieval practices of fasting have been well studied and have triggered debates about the health consequences of extreme forms of fasting, as well as eating problems such as anorexia or bulimia.⁶⁰ In theory, reducing the amount of food consumed and consequently calories consumed is not harmful and may even lengthen life. In New Spain, conventual hagiography has recorded some cases of extreme fasting, but, in general, neither confessors nor conventual orders approved unsupervised and extreme fasting because convents did not want sick nuns who caused extraordinary expenses in medicines and physicians. In the Spanish tradition, Saint Teresa had some suspicion of excessive fasting as conducive to excessive and false raptures, caused by weakness rather than spiritual illumination.⁶¹

Good advice about the meaning of fasting and corporal punishment during the novitiate could prevent excesses of such practices after profession. Thus, Cayetano Antonio de Torres, chaplain of the ascetic Capuchins of Mexico City, asked his spiritual daughters to understand that “to be saintly” they need not pray all day or burden their bodies with “the rough cilicio or the bloody discipline.” They should obey their Rules as they were.⁶² Franciscan María de la Purificación, of the convent of Santa Isabel, was ordered to cut back her fasting practices because her prelates were concerned “that she would lose her life fasting.”⁶³ Before professing as a nun in Franciscan San Juan de la Penitencia, Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad lived in an enclosure for lay women (beaterio). There, she decided to abstain from eating meat and drinking chocolate as a pious practice. In doing so, she attracted the attention of the director of the institution, who judged that she “wanted to be peculiar” and obliged her to adopt a regular diet and rescind her abstention from chocolate and meat.⁶⁴ After she became a nun she returned to her strict diet. She only ate one meal at noon, and boasted that she rarely lit the fire for cooking herself a meal. Her diet consisted largely of seeds and beans. On Fridays she ate bread and some seeds, and drank some chocolate. In order to improve her humility she only ate what other nuns gave her from their own meals, a practice also followed by some Carmelite

nuns.⁶⁵ She understood that her fasting was affecting her health and wrote to her confessor that she felt her body so “dislocated that to stand up was the work of God.” Her Friday fasts weakened her so much that she thought they were worse than her body disciplines, but continued to practice them and thanked God for sustaining her: “all my body shakes; sometimes I must lean against the walls. This strains me so much, that I feel that not even the blood disciplines, which made me faint because my wounds bled abundantly, hurt me so much as the Friday’s fast. But with God’s providence, neither in that time nor in this, has it impaired me for anything.”⁶⁶

There is no indication that, in this case, her confessor advised her against her practices. Confessors as well as abbesses had to follow their own consciences in judging degrees of fasting to ensure that no sickness or permanent harm would ensue, but strong-willed and pious nuns could persuade their superiors that there was virtue in their practices. Sor Marina de la Cruz, described by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora as one of the “most mortified” persons living in Jesús María, ate so little that she sometimes experienced hunger for several days. Her usual meal was some chocolate, thickened with flour and sweetened with maguey honey. In her last years she had some boiled herbed onions and pumpkins, and sometimes a small piece of cheese.⁶⁷ Her diet was mentioned in the narrative as another piece of evidence of her humility and virtue.

The Carmelites practiced fasting as an intrinsic part of their observance. Mariana de la Encarnación, founder of the Carmelite Order in New Spain, began to change her diet in an attempt to reflect in what she ate the degree of spiritual perfection she sought to achieve. Carmelite hagiographer Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios narrated the change in her behavior as the work of God and essential in the process of redefining her religious observance. “Her health began to decline and her strength to decrease; the love of God stimulates to open war to the flesh.”⁶⁸ Those kinds of eulogies prompted other nuns to imitate such exemplar models.⁶⁹ For example, Sor Antonia de San Jacinto practiced three forms of fasting by refusing to eat a full meal, taking only what other nuns left, and abstaining from drinking water and eating meat on Fridays. She also mortified her taste buds by eating sour fruits such as lemons and quince.⁷⁰

An intense devotional life could naturally lead to fasting. After she professed in the convent of Santa Mónica of Puebla, Sor María de San José stated how she became engulfed in her own spiritual thoughts and she lost her appetite. “And I was so absorbed and outside my senses . . . that I had no use of my senses for eating.” When she ate, she had spiritual remorse. Those who saw in the desire to eat an attachment to the body with the neglect of the spirit were torn by interior anguish. This situation was resolved for María de San José, as it may have been resolved for many others who did not wish to practice heroic fasting. She heard the voice of the Lord inviting her to eat: “Eat María, for one cannot go throughout this life without eating, and what the community gives is meant to be eaten . . . for I am not displeased that it be eaten, as long as it is with moderation.”⁷¹ Having received the word of God about her eating practices, she and possibly many other nuns rationalized their need to eat. There was humility in accepting one’s daily bread.

Fasting was only one of several forms of mortifying the body. All nuns were expected to administer themselves some form of penitence, but the degree of penitence was a subject left to the advice of the confessor and the willingness of the nun. San Ignatius Loyola, who set guidelines later followed by Jesuit confessors, explained how penitential practices were a means to pay for past sins and were useful in subjecting sensuality to reason. They were approved forms of seeking contrition and the grace of God.⁷² He did not advise his subjects to seek bodily harm or sickness, but to cause pain, a greater venue for purification. As such, one should know when to take penitence and how. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is said to have indulged in numerous penitential exercises in the last days of her life, by her hagiographer, the Jesuit Diego Callejas, as he tried to create a pious image of her. While much of what he wrote about her last years is possibly exaggerated, he quotes her confessor, Antonio Núñez, S.J. counseling moderation in her exercises.⁷³ Núñez, who was a very influential spiritual director in the seventeenth century, regarded penitence as virtue, but one that should not consist in “extraordinary harshness with fasting, vigils, cilicios or other extreme measures of visible penitence. The measure of your sanctity is not this admirable show but the intensity of your love of God and the solid desire to be agreeable to Him.”⁷⁴

Moderation, however, was not a quality of baroque spirituality. Other advisors and biographers used the example of extreme corporal penitence to insinuate holiness, maintaining a dualist philosophy in regard to body and spirit. The highly reputed late-eighteenth-century theologian, Juan Benito Díaz de Gamarra, biographer of Sor María Josefa Lino de la Canal, founder of the convent of La Concepción in San Miguel de Allende, explained why penitence was essential to a nun. According to him, penitence was how a nun showed she had rejected sin. Divine justice had ordered humankind not to sin but, since it had sinned, payment for transgression was justifiable. Since the body was the source of sin and corruption it was acceptable that it should be punished to destroy all the venoms corrupting life. Penitence should not destroy the body, however, but whatever in the body could cause the eternal death of the soul. The sickness of the body, the miseries of life, and the uncertainty about eternal salvation were in themselves forms of payment and penitence to humanity.⁷⁵

The Christian virgin, continued Gamarra, must exercise herself in penitence, in spirit as well as in the flesh. Without penitence and mortification she cannot maintain the purity of her state and maintain her flesh and the Devil under control. Despite living in a period assumed to have fostered modernity through the advancement of science and secularization, Gamarra returned to an early Christian concept of the rejection of the flesh. Gamarra was not inventing anything that nuns had not already practiced before. However, in the nuns’ own writings there were nuances not necessarily reflected in the advice of some preachers. In the early seventeenth century, Sor Marina de la Cruz, of Jesús María, was quoted as saying: “Could our sufferings, our mortifications, our fasting, our lashings, be compared to those suffered by our beloved Jesus in his delicate body?” In fact, she had wished to be a martyr to repay Jesus’ sufferings, but could only imitate him through self-discipline.⁷⁶ For some nuns the vision of the almost nude crucified body of Christ covered with blood inspired them to punish their own bodies. Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad achieved her zenith of fervor and piety imagining the bodily punishment of Christ. It caused her great pity “to see a most sacred innocent, virginal naked body, missing pieces of flesh, bathed in his own blessed blood.”⁷⁷ From pity to offering oneself in imitation there was only one step.

Hagiographic and autobiographical accounts speak eloquently on the fact that self-inflicted discipline was deeply embedded in conventual observance in colonial Mexico.⁷⁸ Gamarra was speaking a language that practice had made familiar. Relying on this “familiarity,” nuns sometimes used their own servants to inflict discipline on them or otherwise administered discipline on each other.⁷⁹ María de Jesús Felipa, of San Juan de la Penitencia, understood her body disciplines to be a means of redeeming not only her transgressions but those of other people. On one occasion she had a fight with her brother in the visiting parlor of the convent on account of money. She understood the incident as God’s challenge to make her understand that she should love him alone, and concluding that her brother had not been at fault, “gave myself a good discipline on behalf of my brother, asking the Lord to stop him from offending God.” On several other occasions she offered her disciplines for the health of her confessor.⁸⁰ In June 1758, she narrated how she inflicted discipline on another nun, who in turn administered some to her:

I took charge of what I desired for myself, and that moved me to discharge the strikes and mortification, as I did, while she was praying the Miserere and De Profundis. The she got up and kissed my hands and feet, which I resisted, but she won ordering me to let her do it, and [then] she disciplined me, and it caused me such joy . . . that my soul wrapped itself in the contemplation of the pains of my crucified husband . . . and I did not feel the blows, and time passed fast.⁸¹

Her confessor knew about her disciplines and, in fact, ordered her some especially repugnant ones, which she carried out obediently. In the same month of June 1758, she confided in her spiritual diary the almost unbearable experience of a test imposed by her confessor: to wash the blood produced by her discipline and to drink it. The very thought made her weak stomach turn, and she thought she would put a large quantity of lemon in the water and then tell her confessor she could have not drunk it on account of its extreme acidity. She put ashes and lemon in it, but just the thought of having to drink the beverage made her sweat copiously. However, her concentration on the meaning of the life of Christ allowed her in the end to drink it. She gathered strength by remembering the bile of her sins that Jesus was drinking on her behalf. Miraculously, the concoction did not affect her stomach.⁸² Faith provided this and other nuns with a metaphor of sacrifice that allowed them to adopt a behavior that made them see in penitential pain a joy and a means to deliver the sin of others through their own expiation. The role of the confessor in ordering a variety of mortifications or encouraging them is harder to assess, since we do not know their personal reasons to recommend such practices. Unquestionably, the religious culture of pain and sacrifice was so essential to post-Tridentine spirituality that it was naturalized and accepted as necessary and normal. Voluntary forms of penitence were not the same as penitence imposed by the confessor to pay for a sin, but hagiographies of this period make it difficult to ascertain the difference in penitential practices.⁸³ The general tenor of the narratives suggests that in practicing penitential exercises, the nuns were taking an initiative of their own to enhance their own understanding of how to imitate Christ, rather than simply following a penance imposed by their confessors.

Personal forms of self-mortification were carried out in the nun's cell, and there was hardly any way of controlling them. The worship of the bleeding body of Christ could lead some nuns to excesses of self-administered penitence that monopolized the attention of hagiographers pursuing the dramatic hyperbole of the baroque. For Franciscan Agustín de Vetancurt, historian of his Order, and Fr. Agustín de la Madre De Dios, chronicler of the Carmelites, the description of various forms of penitence were the emotional hook that kept their readers fixed on their biographees' lives and made them models for the secular world. According to Vetancurt, Sor María Ana de los Angeles, who professed in San Juan de la Penitencia in 1611, "wore" iron chains throughout her life. After her death they found that some of her instruments of penitence (cilicios) had penetrated her flesh so deeply that it was impossible to remove them.⁸⁴ He described the cilicios as "ornaments that enriched her life." Of Catalina de San Juan of Santa Clara de Atrisco, Vetancurt said that "she hardly had a body to suffer and was covered by cilicios while she tortured her body with fasts."⁸⁵ While Christ's capacity to suffer for humanity was beyond human comprehension, he could be imitated. Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad carried a cilicio of hard bristles before she professed. After professing she wore one cilicio for thirty years. It was made of braided brass and, according to her biographer, it remained as stiff as when it was first made. The device sank into her flesh and impeded her movements, giving her pain. She complained that her pain betrayed her lukewarm disposition for suffering, a typical form of reasoning in her time.⁸⁶ Sor Antonia de San Jacinto, of the convent of Santa Clara in Querétaro, was one of those "heroic" sufferers eulogized by her biographer, Fr. Joseph Gómez. She used brass cilicios that her confessor ordered to have lined with dressed sheepskin to adjust them more easily to any part of her body.⁸⁷ She had others made of wire and bristle or horse's hair. The role of her confessor in the use of these cilicios is ambiguous. He advised her to stop using them as she grew older, but she would not give them up. So, he helped to reduce the discomfort but did not forbid it. The autonomy of the nun in wearing the cilicios was well established, and confessors egged on those nuns who displayed such willingness to punish their flesh. They had few indications of the extent of the pain or the damage they caused by condoning them.

The practice of self-discipline was part of the Capuchin and Carmelite observance, although as we have seen, chaplain Cayetano Antonio de Torres advised his Capuchin nuns not to burden their bodies with such acts. Personal practice was difficult to monitor, and a devout sister like Sor María Leocadia, founder of the Capuchins of Mexico City, could push the boundaries of personal body self-punishment. Her biographer, another nun, tells how as a novice she once fainted during a community act of discipline. Her body was covered with unhealed wounds. After professing, she ate little, drank little, and continued her self-inflicted disciplines. Her health suffered as a consequence. She suffered from intense headaches and it is said that part of her skull broke open and stayed as soft as wax. She lost all her teeth after being given a hot ointment as medication and the physicians removed many "carbuncles" from her stomach with great pain. Despite this, she lived to be eighty-two years old, of which seventy-two were described as lived "in penitence."⁸⁸

The health of Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio—described above—must have worsened from the use of cilicios. According to her biographer, inspired by the example of Catherine of Siena, she tied a chain around her body signifying enslavement to the Virgin Mary. Once, as she genuflected entering the choir, the chain bit into her body and she lost consciousness. She also used a cross three fingers in breadth that had thirty-three sharp points (for the age of Christ at his death). She carried this cross sometimes on her chest and sometimes on her back. She also used a small pincers to bite into the delicate parts of her body such as nose and eyelashes. Once, carried by the desire to suffer, she took off a chunk of flesh. She also put salt in her meals to mortify herself and denied herself water for the same purpose. She did not eat meat and ate very little during Lent. Following other saintly examples, she once drank the corrupt blood of a sick sister and cleaned the sores of another with her tongue.⁸⁹ Her eighteenth-century practices were still strongly colored by earlier examples of using the body as a venue for expiation. From a medical point of view, the amount of harm that a cilicio worn under the habit could do would only be known when the nun became very ill, for that or any other reason. Since the principles of bacterial infection were unknown, and there were few practical ways of stopping the infection of an open wound in a nun wearing a heavy habit and who possibly took few baths, the chances of infection caused by cilicios were clearly very high. Lacking effective treatment, wounds could cause an ulcer-like encroaching infection that could spread and cause extensive damage.

One cannot assume that all nuns practiced heroic acts of self-inflicted body discipline. Exercises that embodied the spirit of humility were sufficient for most nuns. As an example of that genre, we have the Exercises and prayers in honor of the Virgin written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. She was not the type of nun who would commit her body to extraordinary suffering, but she understood the meaning of "exercises" that would purify the soul. Her work gives us a hint of what must have been more common practice than the excessive forms of discipline selected by hagiographers to impress the reading public. In her "exercises" to honor the Incarnation she asks mostly for meditation and prayers, acts of humility and forgiveness, and some "discipline." The latter consisted of fasting, prayers "*boca en tierra*," with lips close to the earth, alms-giving, forgiveness of others, visits to churches, and "if possible" to wear a cilicio, on the third day. Even though Sor Juana did not belong to those who advocated or emulated bloody disciplines, in

1694 she made three special vows to abandon her studies, asking forgiveness for her soul and defending the canon of the original sinless conception of the Virgin Mary. In this instance, she signed with her own blood. As a penitential act it was correct, but only remotely related to those harsh torments practiced by other nuns.⁹⁰

Discipline of the body was also a communal activity. The nun was not only responsible to God as an individual, but as a member of the community. Therefore, all conventual Rules made provision for weekly (as many as three times a week) or monthly communal chapters, public confession of faults and sins that demanded punishment before the others.⁹¹ These were closer to the penitence prescribed by confessors since the Middle Ages. Shaming was assumed to enhance humility, to cure pride, and to teach a lesson to the “sinner” that would avoid repetition of her fault. It also was understood as righteous and necessary to keep order and enhance observance. The discipline hour (*capítulo de culpas*) was a feared trial. Several degrees of punishment were meted out, each fit to redress the depth of the transgression. For a minor offense (*culpa leve*) the punishment was light: the recitation of additional prayers. For graver offenses (*culpa grave*) the punishment could consist of a day of fasting, prohibition to visit the parlors (locutorios) for six months, and begging pardon for the offense committed. The most offensive fault (*culpa gravior*) was incurred by any willing transgression of the monastic vows and carried the strictest punishment, which was left to the discretion of the abbess but involved exclusion from the community for a given period of time.

For the Capuchins of Santa Rosa de Santa María, in Puebla, *culpa gravior* required that the nun beg pardon from the whole community:

Naked to the waist, at the feet of each nun, she will receive discipline first from the Prioress and afterwards from the rest of the community. In the refectory she will not eat with the rest at the communal table, but on the naked ground in the middle of the refectory, and she will receive only water and coarse bread, unless the charity of the Abbess moves her to give the punished something else, and whatever is left from her meal should not be mixed with that of the rest of the community.⁹²

During prayers in the coro the offender would kneel and make a reverence to the rest of the community that was forbidden to speak to her. The fast of bread and water could only be lifted by the abbess, or her right-hand adviser, the vicaria.⁹³ In the Conceptionist convents, any nun defending a punished sister could lose her veil for three years. Not begging forgiveness would entail a sentence of one day imprisoned without their habit.⁹⁴

A still graver fault (*culpa gravissima*) was for those incorrigibles who broke the Rules of the convent with scandal and without showing repentance. This could mean the loss of her veil, a form of official defrocking, which terminated her spiritual marriage to Christ and meant banishment from the community. A nun thus punished never returned to the community; she lost all her rights. She could also be physically imprisoned in a separate cell. There are several standing examples that such forms of punishment were carried out on those occasions that demanded them. In 1693, the city of Mexico learned that Sor Antonia de San José, of the prestigious convent of Jesús María, had entered a sexual relationship with an Augustinian friar, Pedro Velázquez, possibly several years before and, having become pregnant, she delivered a baby girl. She was condemned to the most severe punishment for having violated her holy marriage to Christ by suffering perpetual imprisonment in her own cell and the confiscation of her property.⁹⁵

Discounting the excessive self-flagellation and disciplines practiced by some exceptional nuns, one important question is whether these practices affected longevity. No study on this subject exists. Despite fast and discipline, it seems that the average nun lived a long life. It may well be that most nuns simply did not practice the heroic forms of fasting and discipline described in those cases selected by the chroniclers. The same conventual chroniclers cite nuns of significant longevity in various convents. Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, chronicler of the Franciscan convents, cites Sor Micaela de San Gerónimo de San Pedro de Alcántara, who died in Santa Isabel when she was over ninety. Sor Isabel de San Estevan, of Santa Clara de Atrisco, professed in 1616 and died in 1660, after forty-four years of religious life, and possibly in her late sixties.⁹⁶ While he did not always provide ages, or the years as professed nuns for all his subjects, he reported the length of life for thirty-six nuns. Twenty out of 36 lived for more than 50 years in the convent, one as long as 68 years. Seven out of the 36 spent between 31 and 50 years in the cloisters. The average life in the convent was 49.3 years. Considering most nuns professed between the ages of 15 and 19, these figures support the assumption of a longevity not common for the seventeenth century.⁹⁷ Manuel Ramos Medina also provides data on the longevity among Carmelite nuns in Puebla and Guadalajara in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹⁸ In Guadalajara he gives age and length of life as a nun for 39 out of 81 nuns. Of these, four lived into their eighties, six into their seventies, seven into their sixties, and five into their fifties. In other words, 21 out of 39 lived long lives for their times. For the Carmelites of Mexico City, he cites the number of years spent in the convent, rather than their age. Out of 48 nuns cited (one left as a novice), 21 lived more than 30 years in the convent. Twelve of them lived more than 40 years.

A sampler of Puebla nuns in 1773 confirms that nuns in convents could reach ages not attained by most common women. In San Gerónimo, 58 percent of 64 nuns reporting were over age 40, with only two nuns under 30 years of age.⁹⁹ One nun stated she had been sick in the infirmary for 22 years, possibly suffering from a chronic disease. There were 15 nuns who had spent between 40 and up to 57 years in the convent. Thirty-three nuns had lived between 20 and 39 years. Only three had resided less than 10 years in the convent. A similar picture of a convent populated with elderly nuns is that of Santa Inés, in Puebla. In 1773, of 39 nuns listing their years of profession, fully 32 had stayed between 21 and 50 years in the convent.

Carmelite chronicler Gómez de la Parra cites nuns who lived 38, 40, 50, and 51 years in the cloister.¹⁰⁰ Excluding the possibility of an infectious disease spreading into the convent, such as the one that killed Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in 1695, nuns could be expected to live longer lives than other women. They did not run the chance of dying of childbirth, a very real possibility for most women. They did not catch any sexually transmitted diseases and, given their relative isolation and steady diet, they were more protected from most common diseases. When they became sick, they were interned in the infirmary and given sustaining meals and special nursing attention. On the other hand, the nursing process could be counterbalanced by the implicit brutality of some medical treatments, as seen above. Also, infectious diseases could spread fast in such closed communities in which the practice of charity moved many nuns to “nurse” the sick ones, thus becoming exposed to contagion. Ultimately, there is no satisfactory explanation for the long lives experienced by some nuns in colonial Mexico, although it is a noteworthy fact.¹⁰¹

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

As death approached, its meaning was of supreme importance for the nuns. For Franciscan chronicler Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, death was a historical “marker” around which he organized the lives of those nuns he chose to memorialize. Their biographical entries were ordered according to the month of their death. Dominican Fr. Alonso Franco remembered “those religious who died in this Province,” and both referred to the “most happy death” of their

subjects as the event that had the most meaning in their lives.¹⁰² The “art of dying,” extolled since medieval times, was praised for those nuns who lived noteworthy lives. As women consecrated to God, who had designed their lives around the theme of the salvation of their souls, the time for that final test was assumed to be a joyous relief of all worldly cares and suffering. It was the door opening the promise of eternal salvation, the ultimate prize for a life in which fasting and penitence and sickness purified through suffering. And yet, this rite of passage to a spiritual world was not devoid of suffering and fear, although it was described and interpreted in a variety of ways. Some hagiographies and sermons praised a long-suffering death as a sign of election. God could “purge” a soul by challenging it through a tormented death, as Christ’s own had been. The anguish of death beleaguered Pueblan Carmelite Sor María de Cristo, who simply could not resign herself to die. She was lovingly cared for by her confessors and sisters in religion. Her transit was plagued by visions of the final judgment and multiple “temptations.”¹⁰³ Sor Agustina Nicolasa María, Abbess of the Capuchins of Mexico City, also confessed to being afraid of death. To combat her fear she adopted a nightly routine of seeing her bed as her tomb and saying responses to herself. She also placed death figures in those places of the convent she most frequented.¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, some nuns experienced a great tranquility and even happiness as they neared death, when they expected to “sleep in the arms of the Lord.”¹⁰⁵ For them, death brought the final spiritual consummation of the holy marriage to God, the highest expectation of those who had been the brides of a distant but real husband. Through death he gave those loyal to him the final pleasure of his company. Thus, Sor Clara de San Bernardo “left this life to be with her husband and enjoy the sweetness of their marriage.”¹⁰⁶ The end of life in this earth was also referred to as “repatriation” to Heaven, although most mortals were expected to suffer a period of penance in Purgatory. The concept of “*patria*” meant the kingdom of God to where his subjects returned as a prize for their sacrifices and good life in this world. Gómez de la Parra, a superb baroque hagiographer, injected a sense of serenity and preparedness in his descriptions of conventual deaths. “She looked at death in the face . . . with the happiness of the just,” or in another case, “with a serene spirit, happy countenance and display of great consolation.” For his part, Dominican Alonso Franco underlined the eternity that followed with expressions such as “thus began the happiness that has no end.”¹⁰⁷ Other conventual chronicles and funeral sermons affirmed that exceptional nuns could have a special sign from Christ or an angel about the time of their transit.

Because of its intrinsic value for teaching others, the act of dying was often selected for a thorough recounting. The death of Sor Ana de San Francisco, of the convent of Santa Catalina de Sena, was minutely described by her biographer, Alonso Franco.¹⁰⁸ After having some special visionary communications with God, her abbess asked her to speak of spiritual issues to the community, which she did, paying special attention to the singers in the community, for reasons he does not explain but which suggest that she sang in the choir. Her slow death between Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday was punctuated by a number of visions that included: a communication with God, a “spiritual visit” to the Dominican male convent to take communion, and even singing with the conventual choir. Her last recorded words before she expired were “Now My Lord.” This detailed account of death was a real *mise-en-scène* for the writer, whose purpose was to “walk” the path of death with an exemplar nun to teach others the possibility of “dying well.”

In an expected death, a priest was called to administer confession and extreme unction, while the nuns of the community kept company to their sister to support her in the moment she had expected and perhaps yearned for for many years. Sor Antonia de San Jacinto previewed her death several days before it took place. According to her confessor and biographer, she began having visions of Heaven as a place of a splendid light, harmonious music, happy angels, and saints, and even a procession of blessed Franciscans, the Order to which she belonged. At the very moment of her death her confessor, who was kneeling by her bed, saw her breast rising and her waist arching, while the nun took his hands and asked him whether he could hear the happy music. Later, this vision was reported as a sign of virtue and possibly quoted by the Jesuit who preached on the first anniversary of her death. Sor Antonia had a small circle of devoted confessors who admired her “saintliness.” She had asked her favorite confessors to be with her at the time of her death, a favor she was entitled to and one that gave her great consolation. But, the Franciscan Commissar, using his hierarchical power, asked to be notified as soon as she entered into her final agony so that he could have the privilege of being the first to witness and share her death. Witnessing the last minutes of a person with deep religious strength was a way of partaking of her virtues. Being with Sor Antonia at her death was obviously a moment that her confessors envisioned as spiritually edifying for themselves, in addition to fulfilling their religious duties in administering the last unction.¹⁰⁹

It was also the moment of truth for members of the community who had failed in their Christian charity toward each other. Before the impending death of Sor Marina de la Cruz, in the convent of Jesús María, her fellow sisters solicited her forgiveness, embraced her, and asked her to commend them and the convent to God. In these last hours, the nun took the opportunity to preach to them about the love of God, the observance of their Rule, the discipline of prayer, and the greatness of the prize they would receive. All the community was present when she bid her farewell full of happiness “seeing that God took her to his celestial realm.”¹¹⁰ The theatrical connotations of the narrative may exaggerate, but not betray, the sense of communal support that death brought about. It erased standing personal grievances and reminded the community of their own mortality. It also gave some nuns the final opportunity to engage in “preaching,” a privilege they rarely enjoyed during their lives.¹¹¹

Death was a venue to express special spiritual powers. In 1644 an epidemic hit the convent of Santa Clara, and chronicler Agustín de Vetancurt stated that one of its nuns received a premonition she would be the first to die. In the following year, when the disease appeared in Santa Isabel, another Franciscan convent, Sor María de San Antonio also received the celestial favor of dying to save the others.¹¹² She was not the only visionary who could forecast death. Sor Micaela de Jesús María, of San Lorenzo, was meant to have the gift of foreseeing other nuns’ deaths.¹¹³

In hagiographical accounts death could cause a transformation among the privileged that had lived a saintly life. They miraculously lost traces of disease or death itself, and recovered the beauty and perfection of their youth. Death rejuvenated because the virtues of religious life expressed themselves through the body once the latter had ceased to be the prison of the spirit and manifested themselves without impediments. God’s grace was manifested in that process. Vetancurt narrated how Sor Inés de San Juan, a nun who professed in 1586 in Santa Clara in Mexico City, “whose face had become darker and very wrinkled by age and years of penitence,” achieved after death “an extraordinary transformation, reflected in the whiteness and transparency of her peaceful and beautiful face.”¹¹⁴ Another expression of how religious virtue could express itself after death was in the sweet smell of the body that symbolized the sweetness of the spirit of the deceased.¹¹⁵ Thus, the writers created a complex web of symbols that catered to the nuns’ beliefs in the meaning of death as a transit to the prize they all coveted. The sisterhood of “saintly” lives created a bond that went beyond life, but which found in death a venue to express itself.

FUNERAL RITES

The last ritual in a nun’s life was her burial, a ceremony that demanded as much attention as her profession because it marked the end of her trials in this world and began the promised return to her real country and her Savior. After the body was dressed and laid in the chapel, a priest or religious entered

the choir, blessed the grave and the body, while the rest of the community sang psalms or read biblical passages. The bodies could stay in state, but if the nun had died of a contagious disease, burial was immediate. All nuns were buried in the choir, their bodies being laid atop those of their predecessors, piling on layers throughout the centuries. Only once in a while were bones exhumed to create new space for burials. Thus, the living were literally praying over the physical remains of their predecessors.

By the mid-seventeenth century the ceremonies of wake and burial had become part of a public occasion in which others besides the nuns participated. Notable citizens were invited to the wake while the populace filed into the church to share the theatrical lighting of candles and the sung liturgies. There were vigils and psalms, a mass, if the nun belonged to a distinguished family, a large number of candles, and the long peal of bells to announce the death and invite the city to mourn. For the funeral of Leonor de San José, founder of the Carmelites of Santa Teresa, in Guadalajara, the bishop, the Audiencia, and members of the civil and ecclesiastic *cabildos* attended the funeral mass. The worldly pomp posed a remarkable contrast with a life spent in total seclusion.¹¹⁶ When Sor Antonia de San Jacinto died on November 22, 1683, all the religious orders and the “nobility of the republic” were invited to the funerary rites. To add to the solemnity of the occasion the convent built a *túmulo*, or funeral monument, and lit hundreds of candles.¹¹⁷ Her face was covered with leaves to prevent dust from settling on it. Pieces of her habit had already been taken as relics capable of performing miracles. The casket was filled with lime and, because she had enjoyed a saintly reputation, her place of burial in the church was secretly marked with some bricks. This would help identify it later if her body was moved to a more visible location. The costs of the rituals and the burial were covered by the convent.

Fr. Joseph Bellido, biographer of the eighteenth-century Dominican Pueblan nun, Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, did not miss the opportunity to describe her funeral with an abundance of details. María Anna Agueda died at age sixty, on February 15, 1756, after having been a *beata* for twenty-five years and a nun for fifteen. She had been an exemplary nun, much beloved by her community. It was due to her effort that the beaterio of Santa Rosa had become a nunnery.¹¹⁸ She was the author of several devotional books and became the darling of Bishop Domingo Pantaleón Alvarez de Abreu, who paid for their publication. When she died, her convent and the diocesan church joined hands to make her wake and burial a memorable occasion. The bishop paid for the burial as an act of fondness and respect for a nun whose virtues deserved to be applauded and whom he had admired in life. He insisted that she be interred on new ground and the space of the church where she was buried was totally cleaned of older bones. Her body remained in view for three days. It was placed in an expensive casket inside the lower *coro*, close to the grille, and was adorned with a crown and a palm, the latter for her virginity. So many flowers were sent by convents and private persons that the main doors of the convent had to be opened and the *coro* was filled with them. The convent put carpets all along the way of the funeral cortege and brought out its most expensive ornaments to decorate the church.

Her *túmulo*, placed in front of the grille of the *coro*, was a tall spire covered by a black-fringed velvet that protected a large number of fine wax torches and thick candles of four wicks. Many other candles lighted the church and were handed to the most distinguished attendants. The Governor of Puebla, the *alcaldes* and *regidores* of the city council, the Archbishop of Mexico, the Bishop of Puebla, and many members of the ecclesiastic *cabildo* as well as representatives of all the male religious Orders were present in what must have been one of the most impressive funeral ever witnessed by Pueblans. Several soldiers were posted at the church to contain the public. The community of nuns was in the lower *coro*, their faces veiled, candles in hand, and crying for their loss. The mass was conducted by the canon of the Cathedral Church.

For her burial members of the male religious communities and the church hierarchy were allowed to enter the cloister for a procession in which the nuns alternated with the men in a most unusual ceremony. This was one rare occasion in which the cloister was opened to men. A master of ceremony led the procession. The body was laid down in each of the four corners of the interior patio for a prayer. When it arrived at the burial site, close to where she used to take communion, her own sisters in religion took command, removed her body from the litter, and laid it in her coffin. As the biographer commented, this burial looked like a canonization of a saint. The apotheosis surrounding the last rites and burial for Sor María Anna Agueda may have been unusual, but it was evidence that none of the taste for color, emotion, and *aparato* (or emphasis on the ritual performance of the act) was out of fashion in mid-eighteenth-century Mexico. It was a community civic affair that ephemerally bound rich and poor in the expression of respect for a notable member of the community at large.

Canonical death rituals did not contemplate or encourage any expression of popular devotion, but even though the ceremonial did not officially encourage any outbursts of emotional desire for physical mementos of the deceased, the credulous nature of popular piety created a special post-mortem ritual recorded in many biographies. As in Europe, death prompted the collection of relics from those nuns who were believed to be privileged with the grace of God. After their death, the sisters in religion, the confessors, and sometimes the lay persons close to the deceased carried on a relentless attack on her clothes and even her body to secure a piece that could have extraordinary powers. Such relics could later serve as venues for miracles that would enhance the cause of beatification. The earth surrounding the tomb was collected, and fingers or toes were cut off by avid hands. During the wake of Sor Ana de Jesús, who died in Puebla in 1612, a veritable physical assault on the nun’s body began with some church presbyters who cut some pieces of her habit. None of them would have dared to touch her habit in life, but the pursuit of a piece of sanctity, for whatever protection it could confer, led them to act with an obvious lack of religious decorum. Others followed their example, and Sor Ana lost her habit before she was buried.¹¹⁹

Those who attended the wake of Sor Marina de la Cruz also asked for “a small piece of her poor clothes as a relic,” and since she had few material possessions, those who got some of her belongings were extremely happy. The nuns appropriated everything she owned, including the stone which she had used as a pillow. The cilicios worn by Sor Antonia de San Jacinto, of Santa Clara de Querétaro, circulated among her confessors after her death. Coming from a person they believed had shone in virtues, touching those objects assured a transfer of her qualities to them. One year later, the preacher who extolled her memory gave examples of how those pieces of habit and her relics had already performed cures in those who applied them to their bodies.¹²⁰

This was no isolated incident. The fervor of believers about the curative powers of saintly nuns’ belongings moved even the physician who had taken care of Sor Ana de San Francisco to ask for a relic. He was given one of her stockings which, as the story goes, he put on his head and was cured of chronic headaches. One of her crosses was also used to perform some “miraculous” cures in the convent.¹²¹ Pueblan Sor María de Jesús Tomellín’s body was apparently decapitated at some point, and the nuns kept her head until Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz opened her tomb in 1685 to verify the “miraculous” state of her bones and found out what was missing. He obliged the nuns to return the skull, which they had kept hidden in the convent.¹²² In contrast, the clothes of those who had died of contagious diseases were burned immediately after their deaths. Those who had suffered long sickness and lacked the luster of “holiness” that only a few possessed received no adulation. After their death, it was customary to sell their belongings in public auction among other nuns, but badly worn-out clothes and belongings of sick or very poor nuns were not at all easy to sell, and they were redirected to the servants or for use in the infirmary. Wills that provided for donations to the convent were eagerly awaited and appreciated. The income of the sale of the property of the deceased was most frequently left either to alms to be shared among the “poor” sisters of the convent or to

appointed recipients, such as family members or even members of the clergy.¹²³ These alms could be as small as one or two pesos if the goods were few in number or in poor shape. Since all the communities knew of the class distinctions, the final will of the more affluent religious recognized that gap and attempted to amend it by an ultimate act of charity. That was the case of Sor Josefa de San Rafael, a nun of Jesús María who died in 1797, and who bequeathed the interest on her income to the less affluent nuns of the convent.¹²⁴

DEATH AND TRANSFORMATION

Death did not remove the presence of nuns from the community. The destiny of the soul after departing from its terrestrial prison was an important part of the hagiography of the period, which abounds in stories of the fate of the nuns’ souls and even those of their friends and relatives. After her death, Sor Isabel de la Encarnación appeared in a vision to several of her sisters, informing them that their founder, Sor Ana de Jesús, was already enjoying the glory of God, “singing with a chorus of virgins and dancing with the divine lamb.”¹²⁵ After death Ana de Jesús continued to be the mother and protector of a community that refused to let her go and found consolation in those extraordinary visions. Equally, the venerated Sor Marina de la Cruz appeared to one of her sisters and assured her that their much desired foundation of a Carmelite convent would take place.¹²⁶ Carmelite Sor María de la Cruz, was “known” to have spent three months in Purgatory, because this was revealed to another nun and her confessor. They also “saw” her eventually ascend to heaven.¹²⁷ The veracity of these visions was never questioned. Credulity knew no bounds in the religious imagery of the seventeenth century. Thus, in Heaven and Earth, dead and live nuns continued to maintain a familiar communication among themselves, very much like that which they had built and enjoyed through decades of life together, sharing infirmities as well as consolation. Hagiography continued to be the best medium to strengthen that kind of piety and those popular beliefs.

The voyage between Earth and Heaven had some shortcuts. Some nuns died “in the odor of sanctity.” This meant that the purity of the soul became physical in the body as a sign of the destiny of the soul.¹²⁸ The efforts of the community, devoted men of the cloth, and lay followers to obtain recognition from Madrid or Rome to promote the cause of potential beatification, the first step to canonization, were long shots but real ones, especially in the seventeenth century, which in Mexico could be called the “age of belief.” Sor María de Jesús Tomellín (1582–1637) elicited great fervor and piety in the city and among several prelates of recognized spiritual stature, including the Bishop of Puebla, Juan de Palafox. The biographical and hagiographical effort carried out after her death produced at least seven books, conventual notes by a sister in religion and her confessor, and an abundant correspondence on her merits and her miracles.¹²⁹ The efforts to receive approval from the Congregation of the Rites in the Vatican stretched into the nineteenth century, but were ultimately in vain. Mexico would not have a female saint. The beatification process of the so-called Lily of Puebla became a regional pious objective, and although it failed to yield the desired results, it speaks clearly of the capability of the politics of image-manipulation.¹³⁰ The hagiographical genre earned a remarkable acceptance in Mexico in the century between 1670 and 1800. The numerous sermons written on behalf of nuns whose lives were exemplary and the exceptional emphasis on their lives and afterlives were part of a popular culture of piety dispensed by religious orators on the solemn occasion of the anniversary of the nun’s death. It was through these media that nuns became iconic figures in colonial Mexico.¹³¹ The emphasis placed on their suffering by writings and sermons was as important as their ability to ascend in spirit to God. Their frailty as human beings, exposed through their sickness, revealed them as humanly vulnerable, but their spiritual strength to stand the afflictions of the flesh elevated them above others and made them inspirational models.

Learning about the diseases that affected nuns and about their medical and disciplinary practices is an important step in approaching their life experience in full. The spiritual meaning of expiating sins through suffering, overcoming the desires of the body through penitence and fasting, and seeing disease and death as desirable to attain release from earthly travails are also essential for understanding how body and soul were related to each other in a nun’s universe. However, there is yet another aspect of the body’s inevitable burden that pulled more toward the world than toward sanctity. If sickness and disease could purify a soul, the healthy body could be drawn into sin by the relentless pull of the flesh, as the following chapter explains.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sexuality: A Challenge to Chastity

“Remain faithful to the Lord in the spirit of His marriage, and the loyalty you have promised.... If it is the ugliest thing in the world for a wife to give her heart to other than her husband, how much worse will it be when the husband is God, the Redeemer, Creator and Savior? Reserve all your heart for God. . . . It is very difficult to deal with one and give the heart to another.”



When Bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza sent this message to his beloved daughters, the nuns of Puebla, he must have had in mind a problem that troubled and angered his contemporaries, the so-called “*devociones*” or visits of men to conventual grilles and parlors to talk to nuns of their choice and carry out spurious friendships or a courtship of sorts.¹ These conversations, whether innocent of sexual intentions or not, were regarded as a threat to the vows of enclosure and chastity, predicated as essential for religious life after the Council of Trent (1545–63). It was a breakdown of religious discipline that had already rooted in Spain, where the *galanteo* or wooing of women became a courtly practice that did not stop at the doors of convents.² In 1682, a Franciscan Provincial arrived in New Spain armed with a royal *cédula* of January 29 of that year that incited bishops and prelates to cut all conversations between nuns and lay people “so common in the convents of the Indies” and leading to so many abuses and scandals.³ One year later, in March 1683, Fr. Francisco Avila issued a decree addressing the Franciscan nuns on the decency and chastity owed to their religious state. He criticized all unnecessary conversations in the parlors and locutorios, and ordered the nuns to abstain from such communications and devotions, and aim at living in the purity of customs and privacy (*recogimiento*) that they should observe as brides of Christ. His intervention did not stop the contacts. Well into the eighteenth century Franciscan prelates continued to advise against idle conversations and the exposure of nuns to outside persons through the tornos and other public or semi-public parts of the convent.⁴

The vows of virginity and enclosure, which were supposed to preclude the possibility of any opportunity for them to engage in any erotic or sexually charged activity, did not prevent the development of such situations between nuns, their visitors, and their confessors.⁵ While the cases of transgression should be considered more the exception than the rule, there is no denying that their occurrence points to weaknesses in the system of trust that the Catholic Church placed in its male and female religious. This was not a problem new to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Concern over nuns’ chastity and good reputation had been expressed since the late thirteenth century, when religious authorities reinforced claustration regulations to preserve both.⁶ However, the physical and moral barriers built around the female communities and the individual nuns did not protect them from the curiosity and interest of some men, for whom they were the ultimate “forbidden fruit.”⁷

In early modern Spain, and despite its strong advocacy of orthodox Catholicism, ecclesiastical authorities were increasingly worried about the sexual behavior of the clergy and the mendicants, who were the main culprits of indiscretions with nuns. The issue was whether the authorities saw the problem of transgression of the vow of chastity as one of sexuality or one of dogma. Stephen Haliczer, studying the incidents of sexual transgressions in the confessionals, argues that, in Spain, the increasing popularity of daily or weekly confession and the sacrament of penance after the Council of Trent drove more people to the confessional, making solicitations of sexual nature a frequent occurrence. The need to counter the Protestant Reformation gave the Catholic Church further incentive to pursue and chastise errant clergy who degraded the sacred nature of such an important sacrament. In 1592, the papacy assigned the Inquisition jurisdiction over solicitation among the clergy; it thus enabled the Holy Office to pursue solicitation and solicitants in the peninsula and the oversea dominions.⁸ The need for surveillance of clergy and friars to detect sexual misconduct increased.⁹ In practice, the reality of solicitation was never completely weeded out, for it was very difficult to repress the sexuality of religious men and the church simply did not have enough members dedicated to detecting and uprooting this problem. Since the will to uphold celibacy was thin or nonexistent among some members of the clergy, those who could not control themselves were forced to “make use of the secrecy of the confessional as their only or chief outlet” to approach women. The confessional afforded a measure of privacy and the “only opportunity to talk alone to women and to broach sexual topics under the rubric of asking about possible sins committed under the sixth commandment.”¹⁰ Haliczer notes that there was an upsurge of solicitation of women in seventeenth-century Spain, especially after 1650, and María Helena Sánchez Ortega provides evidence to that effect. The *galanteo* or “courting” of nuns became fashionable in seventeenth-century Spain, introducing a note of worldly temptation in the conventual parlors (*locutorios*).¹¹

Mexican historians dealing with the topic of solicitation have focused more on its sexual nature than on its sacramental implications. Using the Inquisition as their main source of information, they have framed solicitation within the broader topic of sinful behavior.¹² This was the viewpoint of the religious authorities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when they passed judgment on solicitants. They stressed the confessors’ betrayal of the confidence the church had placed in them to guard the spiritual lives of the nuns; the violation of their own vow of celibacy, and the attempt to break the nuns’ vow of chastity. Even in the exceptional cases in which other spiritual concerns drew the attention of the Inquisitors, the sexual charge remained a powerful one in the determination of responsibilities and guilt.

The Inquisitorial files (*legajos*) furnish the definition of “solicitation” used in Mexico throughout the colonial period. Technically speaking, it was the request of favors of a sexual nature during the act of confession. This meant that the requests had to have taken place *after* the nun had made the sign of the cross and had begun her confession. Yet, it seems that in the case of nuns, the Inquisition took into consideration compromising situations extended beyond the act of confession, and untoward behavior and unchaste activities *at any time*—not just during the confession. The objective of the

inquisitorial investigation was to reveal the offense, cause contrition, elicit repentance, and administer the appropriate penitence. Inquisitors were highly conscious of the attraction of the flesh and were prepared to examine it intensely and matter-of-factly when it occurred. The investigation process was to remain anonymous and secret. Its purpose was not to construct any prescriptive body for the public edification of sinners. Neither was it designed to find means of learning how to curb sexual desire at the personal level, or to stop sexual thoughts or sexual practices. Such tasks belonged to the confessor and the diocesan Church. An inquisitorial search into sexuality was a casuistic exercise aimed at finding out the circumstances under which each specific case took place, correcting them by imposing penance to save the soul, and, if viable, separating the parties involved. Each case was unique and enticing as a human experience, but it did not set “precedence” for any other.

The personal reasons why clerics, friars, or nuns breached the highest goals of spiritual life established by the church are difficult to elucidate. When confronted by Inquisitorial judges, they offered expected answers that masked their real feelings. Only close attention to the text of their confessions before the Inquisition reveals subtle meanings that help understand the context of solicitation, the motivations of the perpetrators, and the reactions of their victims. Many members of the Catholic Church had no high calling to saintly life and after years of profession found themselves bereft in a sea of troublesome contradictions. Having pledged themselves to a life of abstinence of all passions of the flesh by vows of virginity or celibacy, men and women in religion struggled to follow those vows while perceiving themselves as surrounded by temptations identified in the hagiography of the period as works of the Devil.¹³ Men in the secular and the regular church were not bound by an enclosure vow, and mingling with people gave them many opportunities to transgress the vow of chastity. Confessing nuns was one of those opportunities. Thus, religious women, confined within the walls of their cloisters, were far from being free from the importunities of sexual harassment that some confessors introduced into their lives, or from their own aroused interest in some members of the opposite sex. Further, confessors were not the only ones who introduced the seeds of amorous distraction in the convents. As noted before, laymen interested in special “friendships” created compromising situations for some of the brides of Christ. The hagiographical portrayal of nuns and churchmen as angelic models of purity simply did not reflect reality. The nuns who became the subjects of hagiographies, conventual chronicles, and funeral sermons, exemplified the cusp of perfection of their orders by avoiding sexuality and successfully sublimating it beyond the flesh. To the contrary, the cases of those recorded as transgressors illustrate the reality at the other end of the pole. There the flesh challenged the spirit in a variety of forms that speak to us of struggle rather than peace, of real people rather than cardboard models.

Spirituality and sexuality may seem antagonistic, but they developed in close proximity and engaged in a dialogue of power at all times. Spirituality sometimes expressed itself in highly erotic terms, while thriving on the denial of the appetites of the flesh. Theologians, confessors, and members of the religious orders understood that the control and eventual renunciation of sex and its affective attachments to members of the opposite sex was built on a constant struggle with oneself. The attraction of the forbidden had to be dealt with and conquered.¹⁴ The dedication of the brides of Christ to their avowed destiny was as firm as it was humanly possible, but some developed feelings of affection or love toward some of their confessors, followed by anguish and shame.¹⁵ Others felt simply harassed by the unexpected and undesired attentions of men they were assumed to trust.

THE BRIDES OF CHRIST AS OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Consciousness of the sexual nature of those who professed was addressed directly in confessional manuals written to address matters of sex-control in the religious state. It was also implicit in some of the examples of hagiographic literature developed by the hardworking biographers and historians of orders and convents. It was also symbolically expressed in the densely personal autobiographical tracts left by some nuns.¹⁶ Prescriptive literature for the brides of Christ commanded purity of mind and body. They were not just expected, but demanded. While the objective of human marriage was the reproduction of the human species, the marriage to God was spiritual in nature, at least in theory.¹⁷ Given the special nature of the spiritual marriage, the physical virginal state of the body was assumed, but it had to be accompanied by chastity, the voluntary rejection of behavior and thought that would incite the sin of lust. Father Cayetano Antonio Torres, chaplain of the Capuchins of San Felipe de Jesús in Mexico City, wrote a small poem praising purity, which he included in his book of advice for novices. In it, God addressed the novice with the following words: “Virginal purity/ Is a beautiful dowry/ That in you, as my bride/ Must be angelical/ My love will make it immortal/ Because as your loving husband/ I will make the fragrance of your purity so everlasting/ That from a tender flower/ It will become a diamond.”¹⁸

Just as in civil law, female adultery was more reprehensible than that of men, when a holy bride diverted her attention from Christ to a man, she was committing adultery. The men engaging nuns in amorous courtship were attempting against Christ himself, as long as they were engaging his brides in illicit activities that distracted them from their lawful husband. Having trespassed the boundaries of honor, their behavior was outright “stealing.” As Guido Ruggiero, historian of the Italian Renaissance, has pointedly put it, to divert a nun’s attention or her love from her groom was to make a cornuto of Christ.¹⁹ While most nuns and confessors never put that situation in such brutal terms, by breaking her vow of chastity and becoming interested in a man, a nun incurred mortal sin and angered and shamed her holy husband.

However foreboding the threat of loss of salvation may have been, the choice that any member of the church, male or female, made on the subject was clearly understood and spelled out by clerical authorities. Whoever incurred the sin did so knowingly. The revised Rules of the convent of San Lorenzo, in Mexico, which were applicable to all Hieronymite convents, warned nuns against devociones, the continued relationship or friendship between a nun and any man. Those “pernicious communications” were nothing but a trap from the Devil to fill their imagination with thoughts totally alien to religious purity. The Rules addressed the issue of modesty by stressing self-control over their own eyes. “When you see men do not lay willingly your eyes on them. Although it is not forbidden to look at them, it is illicit and criminal to desire them or to wish to be desired by them.” If their eyes lacked modesty, nuns could not feel “chaste in their hearts.”²⁰ Concupiscence was engendered by the unchaste gaze that sought and gave pleasure in the act of mutual fixing the eyes on each other.

The concern of the prelates was well founded, for it is through sight that men and women first recognize affinities between themselves. As cloistered women, it could only be through the eyes that women could first communicate their desires. Praising the chastity and purity of Pueblan Carmelite Sor Leonor de Santa Teresa, her biographer tells how since she was a child she rarely lifted her eyes to see even members of her family. He adds: “To preserve herself in this ignorance of the insults of the flesh . . . she helped herself a lot by forbidding the entrance of carnal affections through the door of the senses, and guarding her eyes so that they would not allow access to anything that would stir her heart and raise feelings.”²¹ Nuns were also supposed to police each other when men were present; anyone seeing a sister forgetting her restraint should admonish her privately the first time, and denounce her to the abbess in case of relapse.

Seventeenth-century Spanish moral theologian Fr. Antonio Arbiol, in an extensive treatise on the duties of nuns, gave careful advice on how to care for chastity and purity.²² Dishonest thoughts caused mortal sin. Resisting them was meritorious in itself. Aware of the weaknesses of human nature, he admitted that some nuns “suffered very much and tormented themselves in that continuous struggle against lascivious thoughts” (*tor-pes imaginations*).

They should seek refuge in God and confess themselves whenever in doubt of their nature and their ability to control them. Should they have impure dreams, they should ask God for help as soon as they woke up, because any thoughts about the dream could incite morose delectation (enjoyable memories of a sinful act). Among the things a nun should avoid, according to Arbiol, were bad or dishonest words, reading provocative books, looking with delectation at animals copulating, wanting to be seen by anybody they knew loved them with an inappropriate love, singing “impure” songs, or giving her hand to any man. Consenting in thought to forbidden actions, even though they were not executed, was also an attempt against modesty. Being constantly aware of one’s acts and the intentions of other people’s actions was the most effective remedy against immodesty and the possibility of incurring lust. In 1728, Fr. Martín de Vallarta, chaplain of the beaterio of Santa Rosa of Puebla, also offered a variety of remedies against impure temptation, for which he recommended the exercise of penitence in a variety of forms. He even considered the possibility of spiritual lust if the joy nuns experienced in their moments of religious introspection was felt in the body as “sensual.”²³ This was an important point because some nuns confessed to experiencing feelings of intense pleasure during their visions. The writings of nuns disclosed a broad spectrum of amorous spirituality. It is obvious that they raised the concern of those who knew their most intimate thoughts. However, confessors and spiritual directors were supposed to know the difference between love for Christ as a straight affective feeling and something less pure and addressed to a living creature. Hagiographical literature deals with this issue: the nun, if “tempted” by the flesh, is always victorious, overcoming whatever weakness she may have felt or incurred. Or, on the other hand, she could also be depicted as never being tempted by any lust or impure desires. The creation of a strong woman safe from any attachment to sexual desires was an essential element in the creation of a “mythology” of virgins by destiny and faith.

Under the pressure of such compelling advice and their own doubts about what was “sexual” and impure, a number of nuns called on the Inquisition to self-accuse themselves of betrayal to their “husband” and their sacred vows as they engaged in forbidden thoughts of any kind. Otherwise, they would reveal to another confessor how they had been the object of seductive pursuit by those with whom they had the most intimate contact: their own confessors. Sometimes the solicitant confessor, anguished by his conscience, accused himself before the Holy Office. As a “father” in religion, he had betrayed God, by attempting to steal the nuns’ affection from their spiritual groom. The assiduous attentions of the confessor, defined as “he who was in place of God in this world,” created a tense situation, in which the boundaries among the worlds of spiritual bride and husband, and spiritual father, became confusing for all. The feeling of guilt produced by the ambiguity of the situation could last a long time. In 1713, Sor Teresa de San Francisco, of the convent of Santa Clara in Mexico, admitted having had a “bad friendship” with Franciscan Fr. Alonso de Avila, whom she once kissed in the confessional. While she knew she was defiling a sacred place, she thought it was not a case for the Inquisition. Her community suspected that there was a close relationship between them, given the frequency of the friar’s visits, but during the review of this case by the Inquisition, another nun decided to defend Fr. Alonso and save his “public credit.” She testified that she had confronted Fr. Alonso, asking him why he had been heard reading aloud to Sor Teresa in the confessional. To this he had responded that he had been instructing her on how to confess herself well.²⁴ Since the incident had taken place a few years before, both these nuns revealed their own insecurities by the double process of self-accusation. One wished to clear her conscience; the other to defend the confessor so that the community would be relieved of the suspicion of lack of internal vigilance. Obviously, the incident was brought to the attention of the authorities because it weighed a lot in the personal as well as the communal conscience, and the need for the spiritual peace of all concerned had not abated, despite the passage of time.

The inquisitorial process followed an expected path rich in details and information, since the alleged facts and their circumstances had to be disclosed and examined in their entirety. Transcriptions of the trials were taken down by a trained scribe, notarized, and placed in the institution’s archives. The texts took the form of a questionnaire, in which the attorneys for the Inquisition first asked the accused to state if he or she knew the reasons for having been called to face them and urged them to remember whatever they had done wrong. If, after a reasonable period of time, he or she failed to “remember” and continued to proclaim his or her innocence, the prosecutor indicted the accused and began to question him or her to elicit a free-will confession. One had to prove one’s innocence and the assumption was of guilt. The questions were sometimes oblique, sometimes direct, and always seeking to obtain enough information to fill up with hard facts what was circumstantial evidence at the beginning of the process. Witnesses would be called to help strengthen the case for the prosecutor, but rarely the indicted who, nonetheless, had an appointed defender. The text of the trials are forensic in nature and, as such, a mixture of narration, self-analysis, ecclesiastical pedagogy, and theological and ethical prescription. The attention to detail and explicitness sometimes created a contained world of prurient discourse.²⁵ In general, however, there are limitations to what we learn about the sexuality of female religious in the Inquisition files. Our knowledge of solicitations is bound by the nature of the venues that inform us. The insertion of self-accusatory letters did not elaborate on the circumstances, only on the feeling of guilt. For its part, the Inquisition did not press hard on the assumed boundaries of female modesty. It respected the state of chosen brides of Christ by abstaining from prodding deeply into their feelings and concentrating on male sexuality as the source of concupiscence. This is to be expected in times when the male was assumed to initiate sexual relationships.

At the bottom of the cases of solicitation of sexual favors in the confessional lay the nature of the personal contact between confessors and confessed. Confessors had privileged access to their charges, and obedience to their advice was a sine qua non of the relationship often expressed in the nuns’ spiritual writings and letters to their confessors.²⁶ Their relationship was strongly hierarchical, with confessors mostly assumed to be on the higher level, and nuns before them as suppliants, spiritually kneeling at his feet. Confessors had indisputable power over their charges. Such differences in ranking did not stop some nuns from fostering a very strong affective relationship for their spiritual advisors and vice versa. On the other hand, relations could become personally tense due to disagreements on spiritual direction. Convents under the jurisdiction of the bishop or the archbishop had a number of confessors appointed by the Vicar of Nuns, but a nun had the freedom to choose her own confessor. Some regular Orders, such as the Carmelites, preferred to have their own members confess the nuns of the Order, but this was not always possible. An attempt to make the Archbishop of Mexico accept this preference caused a jurisdictional confrontation that the latter won and was the source of much spiritual distress for the nuns.²⁷ In all cases, nuns were conscious of how any “spiritual relationship” developed and were free to disengage themselves from an unsympathetic advisor. Sor María Marcela, who professed in San José de Gracia in Querétaro, did not have a personal confessor for sixteen years because she could not find one that would satisfy her spiritual needs.²⁸ This means that when nuns engaged in affective relationships with confessors, they had a degree of freedom of choice to continue or to stop it.

The personal ties that many nuns established with their confessors troubled some ecclesiastical authorities, who took advantage of their position to send explicit as well as coded messages to discourage them. José Gómez de la Parra used his chronicle of the Puebla Carmelites to warn nuns against affection toward their confessors. He told his readers how Sor Josefa de Jesús María, who professed in 1615, asked the Lord to show her what was the state of her heart. Christ acceded to her request showing her heart in his hands. It was clean and bright with the love for Jesus, but it had an ugly stain in it. When she asked him what it meant, he told her that the spot “was the affection she had for her confessor, and you take it [affection and love] from me, and even though you offer it to me, it is not complete as I want it.”²⁹ The writer proceeded to caution nuns against those who “love their confessors

without control.” While understanding the nature of that love, he advised his readers—largely nuns—to moderate their behavior by channeling that love into the acts that would earn their eternal salvation: prayer, communion, mortifications, and suffering. If their devotion and cultivation of those spiritual venues equaled that which they professed to their confessor they would be safe. Loving the confessor with excess could be dangerous, because such emotional attachment was likely to become personal rather than spiritual. The message could not be clearer.

Friars and priests—the men in the solicitation dyad—always took the initiative in this process, making nuns the target of their desire. These men were free to roam from convent to convent, and had an exceptional amount of authority over their wards. However, being a target did not imply a passive role on the part of the nuns. They were the interlocutor in that dialogue, and always had the choice of a response to any solicitation they received. Their reaction provides a glimpse of their own sexuality. Latent sexuality was no mystery or secret among nuns themselves. In a rare view of the temptation from a nun’s viewpoint, Sor María Marcela acknowledged having had some bad thoughts or “rebellions” of the flesh, but she quashed them with the mortification of the senses, penitence, and fasts. Explaining how she kept the vow of chastity, she wrote: “Here they [bad thoughts] have proposed to me sometime, but as I feel them I say ‘I do not understand that, and I do not want to understand.’ I place a hex on the enemy (Satan) and I say to him: ‘Here, the Holy Cross is for me to adore, and I immediately retreat into myself, searching for God within me,’ and with this it [the temptation] disappears and does not return in a long time.”³⁰ Sor Micaela de San Rafael acknowledged “concupiscence stimulus” to her confessor who, on hearing her confess such feelings, began to ask salacious questions about sensations in her own body, and on one occasion kissed her face.³¹ In this case, her confession incited his own sexuality, a situation that may have been the genesis of many spurious relationships developed in the confessionals.

Writing on the Puebla Carmelites, Gómez de la Parra relied on information passed to him by Sor María de Cristo, who had known personally many of the nuns whose biographies he wrote. Surprisingly, María de Cristo was not reluctant to provide him some intimate information. Ursula del Santísimo Sacramento, who had known Sor María for over forty years, confessed to Sor María that since her novitiate the Lord had begun to try her with sickness and with temptations “against purity, strong and persistent, and with dirty and base movements of her virginal flesh.” With the simplicity of a sister and co-novice, she told Sor María that “it was the most horrible temptation of those we suffer in this life, and so much so that she could not sleep or rest at night, except from time to time.”³² These feelings made Sor Ursula cry often and abhor confessional days when, presumably, she had to tell her confessor about her impure thoughts. Neither in this case nor in others were male biographers inhibited about writing of such intimate experiences in members of the opposite sex. Just as we have seen in Chapter 5, the body and the mind of the nun was a territory open to the confessor and, as such, he could uncover both to the world in an edifying message. The narrative gave the reader the expected solution to this situation. Sor Ursula struggled and won the battle that, according to her biographer, had been set by God himself to purify her. Within the religious state, all wise advisors expected to find temptations everywhere and solve them using the rhetorical explanation that they were planted by the Devil in his constant pursuit of those souls dedicated to God. Temptations were part of the divine scheme to try the Lord’s sheep.

Any relationship between a nun and a confessor was a test of their respective virtue and moral mettle. For her it was either an opportunity to redouble her commitment to chastity, or an unforeseen chance to play a dangerous game with her own unexplored sexuality. We have cases of both. For a man of the cloth involved in any kind of solicitation, his sensuality was a punishable break of his own vows. Of his own free will he could expose his own weakness, repent, and seek penance. When neither of these choices was taken, he fell within the purview of the Inquisition, because it was assumed that he had exercised his sexuality over vulnerable women who had placed an inordinate degree of trust in him, and he had transgressed the sacrament of penitence.

In the process of solicitation we can detect tactics of spiritual and emotional seduction for obtaining a degree of self-gratification, the more enticing because it was the most forbidden. The Inquisition, as the voice of the church, minced no words when it came to defining the charges against religious solicitants. They indulged in adultery and incest when they attempted to seduce women who were the brides of Christ and their own putative daughters. Perhaps these were strong charges, since we can also see solicitants as men overwhelmed by the demands celibacy made on them, but when the Inquisition decided to strike, there was no mercy. In the case against Fr. Fernando de la Asunción, who in 1718 was accused of continuous solicitation of a Puebla nun, the charges levied against him by the Inquisition’s attorney were a multiple combination of sacrilege, incest, adultery, and rape (“*sacrilegio, incesto, adulterio y estupro*”).³³ Sacrilege, because it went against the religious vows and took place in a sacred space; incest, because solicitation was committed against a “daughter” in religion; adultery, because the nun was the bride of Christ; and rape, because it was understood as ravishing her assumed innocence. Surely, the charges were of a spiritual nature, but metaphorical as they were, they reflected the transposition of the wording and meaning of penal codes to the judgment of moral behavior. This transposition was central to the process of imposing order and defining the degree of moral transgression that members of the church could commit with their behavior. This was clear in another case in which the attorney accused the wooing cleric of having “abused the sacrament of penitence, as a vicious man, scandalizing Christian people with his turpitude, statements, and behavior, by soliciting his spiritual daughters to commit dishonest and base acts, covering his sensualities under such a sacred thing as the sacrament of penitence, and using a sacred place, source of health and grace, as a filthy cistern for his sins.”³⁴

The only valid reason for the meeting of confessor and nun was the need to take and administer the sacraments of communion and penitence.³⁵ The confession of sins allowed the nun to cleanse her conscience of sinful thoughts and bad behavior, and become fresh and pure again for receiving communion. The church prescribed a minimum number of yearly confessions for lay people, but nuns could confess whenever they felt it necessary for their spiritual well-being. In the seventeenth century it was not unusual for a nun to confess at least once weekly and sometimes more often in order to be ready for the mystical bread that seemed so important for them as spiritual nourishment, and which they could take only after confessing. In the pursuit of this broad type of support and consolation, nuns resorted to confession more often than seculars, thus creating many opportunities for encounters with their spiritual fathers. The latter could either encourage or curb the frequency of communion. Although most nuns had regular confessors, “peregrine” or traveling confessors who visited convents irregularly appear to have been occasionally involved in conventual affairs. Typically, however, solicitation developed with regular confessors, with whom nuns had established a situation of regular visits.

Most novices entered the convent after living very sheltered lives at home, employed in prayers and recogimiento, with an education short in letters but long in religious indoctrination. They also had little if any contact with men other than their own relatives. To those who felt a religious vocation, the convent was an obsession: the place where they had an appointment with a destiny they could not elude. While not underestimating their religious vocation, we must note that, for most, the knowledge of how they would react to an amorous siege was untested. Whatever sign of love, lust, affection, or affinity toward others, men or women, they had experienced themselves or observed in others was repressed, or sublimated in their love of Christ. The usual age for admission to the novitiate was fifteen years. Novices could be as young as seventeen when they took their final irrevocable profession. Tender, and possibly nice-looking, novices and young nuns were put under the guidance of spiritual directors who, for achieving that state, were supposed to be “mature” and wise, and have surpassed the peak years of sexual activity. This was not always the case. In general, they were between

thirty-five and fifty years of age, and the celibacy to which they had been subjected for many years was for many a hard test or an impossible pursuit. Like chastity, celibacy was a mental as well as a physical state. By all standards, solicitants were not celibates, but men under great sexual strain. They engaged in suggestive and titillating games that gave them a measure of power over those women who were bound to remain subject to their manipulations, because although a nun could break ties with her confessor, many of those under pressure seemed to be too timid to do so. On the other hand, if the confessors were truly under the spell of attraction to a nun, one may also argue that, in addition to lacking self-control, they were drifting in a sea of uncertainty and anxiety themselves. It is, at times, difficult to draw a line between the situation of a man surrendering to his unfulfilled sexuality and that of the man actively engaged in tempting a nun with his actions.

The types of relations established in the confessional hardly ever led to “physical” acts. The contacts between nuns and their confessors tell us more about desire than fulfillment.³⁶ Confessions in the open, with the nun kneeling before the priest, had been banned by the church in the sixteenth century and were not supposed to take place in the Spanish colonies. The narrow confines of a confessional, in which confessor and penitent were separated by a grill, precluded anything but the most superficial of tactile exchanges. Yet, the confessionals offered an environment of seclusion and intimacy conducive to the release of repressions. The place for exercising spiritual counseling, however, was totally enclosed, barring the view of those within, and holding two spaces separated by a thick lattice, designed so that nothing but a finger perhaps could pass through it. In the nunneries, confessionals should have provided physical separation between the confessor and the cloister from where the nun would confess, but that does not seem to have been the case in all convents. There must have been variations in the design that explain the possibility of at least holding hands and touching parts of the face. Regardless of its shape, the space of confession was often dark and intimate and contributed to an erotic charge that could be strong enough to have led some into “pollution,” that is, sexual arousal.

Other places in the convent could be used to establish personal contacts, even though the presence of a man, even the confessor, raised all awareness systems and communal vigilance. The nunnery’s visiting parlor offered little privacy and meetings and conversations there were under the surveillance of the *escuchas* (listeners). Despite their presence, some communications took place there. Confessors were also permitted to visit a nun’s cell to administer sacraments in cases of sickness. On those occasions, a certain modicum of privacy was granted between the confessor and the sick nun, but not for long. Such encounters were brief, but a few instances of amorous pursuit took place under those circumstances. The rare known cases of actual sexual contact between a confessor and a nun took place in remote parts of the convent after all sorts of preparations and hiding schemes had been plotted.³⁷

The solicitation of the brides of Christ reviewed by the Inquisition were those in which there had been activities of an erotic nature threatening to destabilize the always delicate balance between flesh and spirit. I have selected cases that illustrate forms of behavior in the confessional, and how such behavior was interpreted and dealt with by the ecclesiastic authorities. They are not “typical” or “atypical” since they all were unique. Thus, what follows is not a “typology” of circumstances, because they do not exhaust all the potential erotically charged and sexually meaningful encounters of nuns and confessors. They simply illustrate some of the circumstances under which such encounters could and did take place.

TEMPTING AND TEMPTED

As stated above, we cannot assume that nuns always rejected the entreaties of the confessors. Neither rejection nor innocent shock were the only responses from the brides of Christ to male solicitation. Examples of solicitation in the convents are found all throughout the colonial period, and while strikingly similar in their general features, they disclose a variety of personal nuances that give the art of wooing its uncanny attraction. There is no perceived periodicity that could point to an increase or decline in these practices.

Cases of corresponded solicitation stand out as examples of expression of latent sexuality. In the mid-eighteenth century, in the convent of Santa Catarina de Sena, Puebla, Sor Marcela Antonia de la Santísima Trinidad was engaged in a confessional relationship with her spiritual father, Fr. Luis Mateos. Their behavior became obvious to a number of cloistered witnesses, and one wonders how they could have carried on their relationship without any reaction from the abbess or any denunciation by other nuns. The familiarity of a confessor’s presence could have led to negligence in surveillance and even secret complicity among the nuns.

Father Mateos seemed to have been a typical “wooing” priest of the time, a man who engaged in erotic games in the confessional with several nuns and young girls interned in convents and schools of the city who had selected him as their “spiritual director.” He paid frequent visits to Sor Marcela Antonia in the parlor where nuns talked to lay people, and where confessor and spiritual disciple could see each other fully face-to-face. There, they were also observed by other visitors as well as other nuns. In fact, several nuns recalled seeing Sor Marcela and Fr. Luis holding hands and engaged in animated conversations while sharing cigarettes that they passed through the grille. The pleasures of cigarette smoking are a common thread in several Inquisitorial cases, suggesting the association of tobacco products with erotic stimulation. The Inquisitorial process reveals that Sor Marcela Antonia showed a couple of her conventual sisters letters from the friar in which he called her *lucerito de mi alma* and *muy mía* (“little star of my soul” and “my very own”). How many letters did they exchange? In this case we do not know. The Inquisition preserved many love letters penned by men of the cloth, all of them examples of mediocre writing, albeit continuous dedication to the art of wooing. This confessional relationship between Fr. Mateos and Sor Marcela went sour, and it ended in a noisy verbal battle within the narrow confines of the confessional that lasted for over one hour and was overheard by another nun, a witness to the case. She reported having heard Sor Marcela Antonia saying “I am the mistress” and the confessor replying: “I want nothing else with you. I will burn your papers.” One wonders if the nun had acquired other wooers and he reacted with the customary anger of the jealous proprietor, or whether he was abandoning her. Although we do not know who denounced the relationship between Fr. Mateos and Sor Marcela, the assumption points to a repentant accomplice. The Inquisition gathered evidence about them for several months, casting a net that would leave no loopholes. What we learn from the process was the nature of erotic games that went on in the quiet seclusion of the confessional converted into a love-nest.

Fr. Mateos flirted with at least two other women. One of them was an eighteen-year-old “secular,” a young woman living in the convent of San Jerónimo, also in Puebla, with whom he engaged in many conversations on the days appointed for confessions. Once he felt more secure in their relationship, he attempted sweeter approaches. He passed his confessional daughter a bit of candy through the small opening in the lattice, and shared cigarettes with her. She did not complain. She was eighteen years old and had been raised in the convent. It might have been the first time that a man paid her special attention. Encouraged, he tried something more symbolic of his desire. On one occasion he begged her to put her finger through the opening and bit it several times in what suggests a form of oral gratification. When she knelt for taking communion in another part of the convent, he took the host and playfully put it in and out of her mouth several times, and held her lips with his hands.³⁸ While playing coy, the girl willingly consented to the erotic game for a while. Another girl interned in the school of Jesús María also engaged in some flirting with the friar. She was not included in this suit, which is truncated at this point.

Another case of consent and pursuit of sublimated seduction in the confessional is that of Sor María Antonia de Jesús Castillo, who in 1797 was a professed nun in La Concepción of Mexico City.³⁹ She was twenty-eight and had begun confessing with Fr. Francisco Rucabado when she was a student in the Colegio de San Ignacio, a very respectable school for girls of Basque ancestry. Twice a week for two years and three months she had confessed in the school with Rucabado. After her profession in La Concepción she continued to confess with him, since he was the main chaplain of the convent. Rucabado took an unusual interest in his charge, calling her “Toñita” (diminutive for Antonia) before the confession and obliging her to stand outside the confessional, so he could take a good look at her before pursuing his spiritual tasks. After her profession the priest advanced in the terrain of familiarity, openly confessing to her several times that he loved her very much, and that if he could, he would embrace her. He asked her to smile while they were in the confessional and began a practice of asking her to come so close to him through the dividing lattice that they could touch eyelashes. This was a well-thought-out and executed act, since he asked her to state whether she felt his eyelashes on hers, and in a couple of instances touched her eyelashes with his fingers while saying: “The little eyes of my little daughter Toñita; where is the other eye of my little daughter Toñita? I want to see it.” In his erotic conversations, the priest often mentioned her breasts, expressing concern over their being compressed by the habit and telling the young nun to take care of them because they were so unlike the hanging breasts of lay women. This man had obviously fixed his gaze often on women’s breasts. Toñita’s body, even though covered by veils and robes, was seductive to him. He insisted that she kiss his hand whenever he requested, and on the palm rather than on top, obviously the most sensitive part, which he could use to press her lips while she kissed it. He also managed to touch her face and lips when administering communion, and asked her to walk close to him whenever he entered the convent for any purpose. The constant mention of her body parts in the diminutive (*boquita, manitas, pechitos*—little mouth; little hands; little breasts), was accompanied by other suggestive questions about what place he occupied in her heart. Once he exchanged cilicios with her in what must have been a symbolic exchange of flesh, since cilicios were the closest things to touch the body of the penitent. The attempt to hide his obvious interest in the woman’s body behind the appearance of paternal vigilance and concern makes this a titillating case of spiritual incest, enhanced by the abundant use of details requested by the Inquisitor and provided by the young nun.

Sor María Antonia also testified to the intimacy of another nun with her confessor that had been detected by the abbess, who possibly warned the sister in question about him. This warning notwithstanding, the nun followed the priest closely with “speaking eyes” in the words of witnesses, and became jealous of his relationship with other nuns and secular women outside the convent. Fr. Rucabado had other devotees in the convents of Santa Inés, Regina, and Jesús María. Two other secular names are added to the list of women he wooed: a girl in the school of San Ignacio, and a woman who lived in a house next to the convent’s cloister. They all seemed to have been members of the priest’s spiritual female coterie. Asked by the Inquisition’s officers why she and others consented to the requests of their spiritual father, and satisfied his demands for verbal and body compliance, Sor María Antonia said that they all wanted to “please” him. Religious instruction of the period explained to the nuns that their confessor’s will should be obeyed “blindly.” Witness the testimony of one nun, whose confessor urged her to memorize and to repeat often the bond that joined them, by repeating frequently “I am the daughter of obedience. I have no will except that of my father to whom I am bound by a vow.”⁴⁰

Fr. Buenaventura Pérez, of the Franciscan Order of San Diego, took advantage of such a vow of obedience. He is another example of a predatory confessor who cast a wide net among the seculars living in the convent as well as novices and young nuns. His exploits in the Franciscan convent of San Juan de la Penitencia in mid-eighteenth century Mexico City were based on the exercise of his power to request unconditional obedience from his spiritual daughters. At age forty-three, Fr. Buenaventura seemed to have a fixation with women’s breasts. He demanded from several of his lay daughters to “bare their breasts” for him as an act of penitence and an expression of total obedience.⁴¹ He argued with them that the greater the embarrassment for them, the more meritorious the penitence. María Gertrudis Castillejas, a nineteen-year-old lay woman who lived with Sor María Rita de Santa Gertrudis, did as he asked because “she would do anything he ordered her.” Other lay residents living in the convent had also acceded to lift their skirts and show him their legs. One of them did not believe that she was incurring sin with this act. On the other hand, Gertrudis Arteaga, a young novice, was not as easily convinced. In fact, she refused to carry the same order and felt so embarrassed and fearful that her conduct would stall her profession that she eventually confessed it to another friar. She threatened to leave the convent if Fr. Buenaventura continued to press his case. He had tried to convince her that in showing him her breasts, she would be imitating Christ, who had bared his breast to his suffering. She chose to dissent and defy his call for obedience. Here is an example of free will to disobey a confessor that marked the difference between the seculars in the convent and the religion-bound novice.

The Inquisition’s investigation in the above cases revealed that the friar had also persuaded Sor Ana María de Jesús, of the convent of Santa Isabel, to bare her breasts for him. Sor Ana María declared that she had been greatly embarrassed in performing the “penitence” since she had never shown her breasts even to her own natural mother. Apparently, the friar wanted to go beyond the breasts, and had requested her to show him “her private parts” but she absolutely refused to do so. The nun declared that she erased his requests from her memory once out of the confessional, “because he was a confessor and he must have known his duties, and thus she had never confessed” these actions to another spiritual director. Here we have an important key to explain the dysfunction created by placing the brides of Christ under the guidance of men whose own fragility was, in theory, ignored by the institution that enabled them to gain power over their charges. Some nuns were unwilling to declare what their confessors did to them and preferred to obey and “forget,” thus perpetuating the situation of abuse, but creating many long-term spiritual problems for them.

On the other hand, the existence of networks of female devotees who confessed a desire for their confessor’s touching and wooing makes us aware that these women’s restrained sexuality was curbed but not dead, and that it could revive under the ministrations of their so-called father in religion. Augustinian Fr. Ignacio de Escobar had a retinue of spiritual daughters in the convent of La Santísima Trinidad of Puebla. Among them was Sor Francisca Manuela de Santa Teresa, who was twenty-three years old in 1714. When she decided to confess the peculiarities of their relationship she provided another piece of information on what could happen in the confessional. Before beginning confession, he would address her as “*mi alma*” (my soul), and would tell her how much he had thought about her and missed her, asking her whether she liked him, and engaging in petty talk about their fictitious relationship. Escobar had several other devoted confessional daughters, all of whom he treated “equally” as “my soul,” from whom he requested special dishes to be cooked for him, and whom he visited frequently in the locutorio or conventual parlor, very much in the vein of the galanteos practiced in Spain. When Sor Francisca expressed concerns about such conversations, he became angry and abstained from using the loving words he had used before. Another of his de-votées was Sor Gertrudis de la Soledad, of the convent of La Concepción, who was thirty years old, and who became totally enamored of Fr. Ignacio, exchanging love notes with him that both kept under their respective pillows. For unknown reasons, she chose to confess with another friar, which made Fr. Ignacio plead with her to return to him, “threatening” to die of pain if she would not. He even cried in the confessional.⁴² Despite such extreme displays of emotion, this relationship stopped when without any further notice he decided to abandon the adoring nun. This relationship had taken place several years before and she decided to confess after falling ill, possibly driven by the fear of having sinned mortally.

A more audacious relationship took place between seventeen-year-old Sor María Paula de la Santísima Trinidad, a novice in Santa Clara, Puebla, who in 1798 admitted a relationship with Franciscan Fr. Ignacio Troncoso. After initiating a personal friendship in the confessional with the usual verbal flirtations and exchange of cigarettes and kisses, Fr. Ignacio had the opportunity of confessing her in her cell, as she pretended to be sick to have him come into closer contact with her. This “tryst” had been arranged and when it took place, the nun and the friar indulged in body caresses and kisses, followed by his statement that he wished he could lie in bed with her. Since circumstances did not permit that pleasure, a few days later she confessed to him that she was unhappy and wished to leave the convent. He suggested the idea of elopement, but the whole process was cut short by the involvement of a maid and the confiscation of a love letter by another nun, who gave them to the abbess. Fr. Ignacio left the city for Mexico, but he was imprisoned by the Inquisition. As for the young woman, she was not yet ready to forget that she was a sexual being very much attracted to a man, but her desire was denied by her vows and those of her “pretender,” who subsequently admitted several cases of solicitation.⁴³ What punishment was meted to her by her abbess is unknown.

Some of the accusations raised against confessors who took liberties with their spiritual daughters were often instigated by one of their own, a second confessor consulted by the nun. Faced with confessions of such nature, those who took seriously their roles as spiritual fathers denied absolution to the nun they administered to, unless she denounced the solicitor, an imperative she could not dispute. Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad found herself in this predicament. Don Nicolás Ramírez, her confessor, had asked her for a lock of her hair, with which she had complied. He had exchanged cigars with her in the parlors of the convent, and once taking her hand through the iron grill told her he wished to take her tongue. He had touched her lips and her chin when administering confession and used words of love before and after confession. The Inquisition’s attorney seemed to be interested only in finding out why he had asked for a lock of her hair. Having found out that the confessor declared having burned her hair, the attorney decided to shelve the case pending stronger evidence.⁴⁴ At times it is difficult to discern the logic behind the Holy Office’s decision to abandon a case.

SELF-RESTRAINT AND FAILED SEDUCTION

Self-restraint to resist seduction demanded a lot of effort from those trapped by their own sexuality. In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Juan de Dios Castro Tobio was the weekly confessor of Sor María Josefa de la Peña, a nun of the teaching Order of La Enseñanza, in Mexico City. For two years he performed his duties with no sign of impropriety, but then she became ill and he had to confess her in her cell. He was apparently overwhelmed by the accumulated erotic charge of his ministry, and after holding her hand for a long time embraced her and talked to her fondly. Having returned for a second ministration, he went further. He embraced her and joining his face to hers confessed that he had never experienced similar feelings for any other nun, and could not understand what power she held over him. He then asked whether she had had suitors before she professed, and embracing her again asked her to lift her face and look at him. Then he proceeded to confess her and absolve her, holding her hand for a while. Detecting how disturbing the experience was for the nun, he became upset and left. He never approached Sor María Josefa again, and it is unclear whether he remained as her confessor.⁴⁵ As she remembered these two occasions, she remorsefully confessed them to another confessor who compelled her to denounce herself before the Inquisition. Juan de Dios Castro Tobio had probably respected the sanctity of the confessional for years, but nurtured a growing secret love for his spiritual daughter. Once beyond the confines of the confessional space, facing her in her cell and on her bed, he succumbed to his feelings. The cell was a part of the nun’s personality and life. In this domain she lived her most private life. Her bed was more than a resting place. For lay people it was the designated place for sexual relations, and the confessor was living a layman’s fantasy. He went as far as he could, cognizant of the close surveillance exercised by the community over visiting confessors. The account presents him as any lay suitor, seeking physical contact and confessing capitulation to the attraction of the woman, while prolonging the encounter by holding hands. Having detected her shock, he stopped courting. The self-restraint imposed by the church won the day, but the process did not stop there, because the other party, the woman object of his desire, had also to redeem herself from guilt by association. Church discipline should have compelled her to accuse him immediately, but she did not, and she waited a long time before she confessed the incident to another confessor. In the meantime, she waited and pretended to forget. She may have been trapped in the net of unrequited desire but it is most likely that, as others before her, she preferred to think that the incident carried no punishment to her until another confessor taught her otherwise. So much time had taken place between the incident and the denunciation that when the case came to the attention of the Holy Office no charges were ever brought, because Juan de Dios Castro was already dead. That was a final and easy solution to Sor Antonia’s anxieties.

Solicitors encountered resistance among nuns who were unwilling to foster such dangerous liaisons. Sor Catalina de la Asunción, of Santa Catalina de Sena in Mexico, was no longer young when she became the object of her confessor’s desire. She was fifty-five years old in 1667, when she denounced Fr. Andrés del Rosario, a Dominican confessor. She was induced to make her denunciation by another Dominican to whom she had given details of the situation. Fr. Andrés del Rosario had wooed her, telling her he loved her more than his own life and asking her to become one of his devotees. This corroborates the fact that some confessors gathered a select number of nuns as “their” flock and expected them to tie themselves spiritually to their directives and attention. Fr. Andrés had begged Sor Catalina for a written note in her handwriting and had asked her unbecoming questions about her sexual desires. Sor Catalina avoided answering the question on whether she experienced “pollution,” pretending she did not know the meaning of the word, and attempting to dissuade Fr. Andrés from his pursuit by telling him she was neither young enough nor strong enough to correspond him.⁴⁶ Having told about Fr. Andrés to two Dominican friars, one of them asked her to remain silent while the second one denied her absolution until she denounced her solicitor. She followed the second advice. It was only several years later that archbishop elect of Durango, Juan de Ortega y Montañés, gave orders to intern the wooing friar in the jail of the Inquisition. There are no further tracks of this case. Covering up solicitation by brothers in the same religious orders was not uncommon. They asked silence from the victims in order to protect the “honor” of their Order and time to solve the case in private.

A strong resistance from the solicited women could have put an end to unwanted advances. In 1718, Fr. Fernando de la Asunción, a Carmelite friar and an older man, became obsessed with Sor María de Guadalupe, a nun of La Concepción, Puebla, who had confessed with him every three days for six months. Throughout that period he established the trust of his spiritual daughter while his own desire for the woman increased. In a sudden turn, from the nun’s viewpoint, the friar began soliciting her verbally with insinuating love words. The uncooperative nun refused to continue confessing with him, but using the leverage of his power as confessor he continued to recall her to the confessional. There he used the double strategy of threatening and trying to please. He told her he had enough power to drive her crazy, while pleading to exchange letters with “sweet words from his heart,” and forcing her to agree to see him whenever he called on her at the convent. On one occasion that he had access to the cloister, he called for her to come to his presence and, despite the nun’s refusal to see him he imposed his authority upon the abbess to oblige the latter to call Sor María de Guadalupe from her cell. When Sor María de Guadalupe entered the room in which he waited, he embraced her after she had kissed his hand in the obligatory act of respect and submission. His inappropriate public embrace signified that he had gone beyond the limits of his own self-restraint.

Her reluctance to continue seeing him seems to have prevented further encounters, but he persisted in sending letters to her to oblige her to return to the confessional. He insinuated situations of intimacy and, at the same time, talked to her conventual sisters while pretending not to care for her when he visited the convent. Eventually, his insinuations of wanting to see her in bed broke the patience of the nun, who called another father to serve as her confessor and forwarded the information to the Inquisition.⁴⁷ The inquisitorial brief for this case contains several letters narrating the friar's goings-on in a style reminiscent of the dialogues they carried on in the confessional. The insertion of the confessor's letters gave the trial not only the evidence it desired, but kindled the fire in the attorney's deposition. Presenting the nun as a candid dove (*cándida paloma*) and the friar as a lascivious wolf, he saw clearly how the tension established between them was the equivalent of a galanteo or wooing. The friar's conduct was described as seeking "*asquerosos deleites*" (revolting pleasures) leading to "*un fin venéreo*" (a venereal objective), in a sacrilegious plan against the bride of Christ. Pitting innocence against sin, he declared the situation one of a titillating combination of "sacrilege, incest, adultery and rape." While not committed in the flesh, the naming of such powerful sexual transgressions indicated the porous boundary between real and intellectual sexuality, and the practical use of sexual imagery to shame transgressors. The implication in the attorney's language was that the sexual acts named in this deposition had actually taken place in the mind of the aggressor. Both the attorney and the accused friar stood on a terrain they seemed to have known well: mental sexual enjoyment and the power of evocative "sinful" thoughts (morose delectation) were mortal sins. What made this case graver was the willful transgression of the boundaries of "morose delectation" to actual aggressive behavior, such as the embrace and the kiss that were exchanged on the occasion in which the friar imposed his will over the reluctant nun. Although the outcome of this case is unknown, the attorney's stand suggests that some of them took sexual transgressions against the modesty of nuns very seriously. The violation of the sanctity of the marriage to Christ called for the strongest recriminations. The verbal indictments stood in strong contrast with the actions taken against the transgressors. The penalty meted to solicitants was removal from the task of confessing women and transfer to another location. The spiritual punishment is not recorded, but the legal outcome of these cases suggests that the Church, in general, was unable to control, and unwilling to weed out effectively, its own errant members, despite its own stern condemnation.

SEDUCTION TRIUMPHANT

The case of Sor Agustina de Santa Clara and Augustinian Fr. Juan Plata, both around thirty-eight years of age in the late 1590s, does not quite fit into the scheme of eroticism confined to the confessional. Although it might have begun there, we pick up this case after it had become an open sexual relationship, which shook the Dominican convent of Santa Catarina de Sena in Mexico City, and eventually came before the Inquisition. Cases of successful seduction between confessors and nuns are indeed rare. Only two have been recorded in the Inquisition. Thus, as we look into their details we must be aware that they were exceptional. Yet, the records of the Holy Office are replete with erotic messages that cast light on the sexual behavior of couples. The guarded privacy of sexual life in the sixteenth century could only be broken by the Inquisition, and when nuns and friars were the actors, they seemed to have superseded the boundaries imposed by their habits and acted as passionate subjects of their own desire.

Between late August and early September 1598, Fr. Juan was detained and sent to the Inquisitorial prison. He was being investigated for *alumbradismo*, or the propagation of beliefs in enlightenment derived from direct communication with God, in the company of a coterie of nuns, friars, and lay people.⁴⁸ The protagonists of this tale of passion were involved in a presumed circle of *alumbrados* who were charged by the Inquisition as heretics. The threads of spirituality were entangled with those of sexual desire and, while the latter received full attention, the former was perhaps a stronger factor in the determination of guilt by the Inquisition.⁴⁹ The case was initiated as an investigation of *alumbradismo*, and the revelations about the sexual encounters of Sor Agustina and Fr. Juan were part of the larger case.

It is unclear how their "friendship" began, but Fr. Juan Plata and Sor Agustina de Santa Clara were part of a small group of people who gathered to exchange ideas about spiritual experiences. They had no compunction in letting others know about their special attributes in matters of faith, as they felt spiritually endowed with special mystic power. On many occasions during the development of their special friendship, Fr. Juan had declared that Sor Agustina had privileged spiritual grace, and she acted in the convent as if she really had. As chaplain of the convent of Santa Catarina de Sena, he enjoyed the prerogative of access to the interior of the convent. It seems that when he occasionally entered the premises to give spiritual help to sick nuns he took the opportunity to talk to Sor Agustina. Gossip about their conduct and the occasional admonitions of the abbess to the nun had no effect on the couple. He came to the parlor often and engaged in long conversations with her under pretense of consulting her on mundane as well as spiritual issues.

There was a detectable degree of protection among the nuns, who talked among themselves but took no action to denounce this relationship. This was not unusual. An inquisitorial investigation could tarnish the community's honor, and nuns were very sensitive about their public image. Fr. Juan also had a simultaneous relationship with another nun in the same convent, Inés de San Pedro, with whom he had engaged in "dangerous" petting such as putting his hands on her breasts. Recalling his behavior, Sor Inés declared that she realized that he was using her as a decoy, and her perception was later corroborated by Fr. Juan during the trial. During the inquisitorial investigation it became clear that Sor Inés was angry and jealous at the relationship between Fr. Juan and Sor Agustina, because he had declared Sor Agustina to be very saintly, while he placed Sor Inés at a lower spiritual level. Thus, we have here a triangle of dangerous liaisons with one nun used as a "decoy" while intense desire was channeled to another one.

When Fr. Juan was questioned about his relationship with Sor Agustina, he gave a straightforward account of his male desires and his carnal relationship with her. Theirs had been a long story of several years of desire, erotic manipulations, and eventual coitus on several occasions. During years of increasing longing for each other they exchanged passionate touching, air kisses, and amorous words in several parts of the convent such as confessionals, doorways, internal chapels, and the room in which the young nuns were taught. They finally had carnal access on the roof of the convent, to which she climbed using a ladder, telling the novices that she was looking for some birds' nests. When Sor Agustina climbed to the roof to meet Fr. Juan three novices witnessed her actions. They also declared that they had seen the priest on the roof too, adding that they later observed Sor Agustina washing her legs after she returned to the cloister. At the time of these happenings they did not reveal them to anybody. She had authority over them.

Sor Agustina and Fr. Juan were aware of the meaning of their "affair." The possibilities of sinning by engaging in a personal relationship were well defined in canons which they both knew well. On several occasions they consulted each other on how to avoid confessing their sins. They persuaded each other that acts committed involuntarily by the "inferior parts" of the body, and without the will of the "superior levels," did not incur mortal sin.⁵⁰ Although a distortion of the church teachings, this explanation denoted ingenuity in deflecting the weight of sin. During his trial, Fr. Juan sought to exonerate himself by attributing to Sor Agustina some of the advice which could save them both from a full reprimand of the church. By declaring that he had consulted her and that she had reassured him that their sin was "involuntary," he attempted to cast doubts on his own culpability.⁵¹ He reversed the roles of spiritual advisor, attributing to her the power and the canonical knowledge to find an excuse for both.

Their combined confessions furnish details of their seven-year relationship that even in writing is highly erotic. It began with an obvious mutual

attraction, followed by some stolen kisses, which at first gained the priest some reproach from the nun, but were soon followed by her consent. From kisses they moved to “lascivious” touches which incited “pollution” (sexual arousal) in both. These activities increased and took place wherever they had the occasion to engage in them. They were all minutely described by the priest who was under pressure to empty his memory and his conscience as the Inquisition pressed charges. The confession revealed more than one would imagine today. In September of 1598, he recounted how he instructed Sor Agustina, who lacked practice, how to squeeze his genitals very hard so that his pollution was more copious and more pleasurable. In its search for details and complete confession, the inquisitorial text comes close to the line separating eroticism from a sexual manual.⁵² He confessed that their meetings reached a point in which they masturbated each other, inciting themselves with words and exposure of their genitalia. Sor Agustina confessed to Fr. Juan, according to his statement, that just the sight of him, the sound of his voice, or any touch from him, incited “pollution.” This is one of the rare occasions in which a female sexual response has been recorded.⁵³ Their crowning tryst on the roof of the convent was possibly planned with much anticipation and care. Plata confessed that, weeks prior to their first sexual encounter, he had slowly circumcised himself with a pair of scissors so that the prepuce “would not impede him to have carnal access with the said Agustina de Santa Clara and to be more apt for it, and receive more pleasure.”⁵⁴ He stated that she was a virgin when they first made love. After engaging in sex she was preoccupied about becoming pregnant, and they discussed whether trying to stop any possible “generation” (pregnancy) would be a mortal sin. Not surprisingly, they both agreed that one could take measures against conceiving a child to preserve one’s honor. Ecclesiastical canon stated that sexual contact had to be open to procreation to be admissible to the church. Since Fr. Juan and Sor Agustina decided that such was not the case, he found some laurel leaves that she could apply to herself before coitus, and some herbs that she could use to prevent a pregnancy.

On September 27, 1598, Sor Agustina was taken to the jail of the Inquisition to be questioned. She confessed having heard voices and seen strange lights, which gave her a feeling of having special vocation for communication with God. She first declared that she lived a pious life, and pretended not to know why she had been called to face the Holy Office. This was a tactic often followed by those confronting the Inquisitors. After a few days granted to the person under questioning to jog her or his memory, the attorney read the indictment.⁵⁵ When Sor Agustina heard her charges she readily changed her mind and passively acknowledged them, admitting that she had lied in regard to having alumbra da signs and her connection with God. On her own sexual behavior, she acknowledged all the charges but first denied having “pollution,” stating that she had lied to Fr. Juan and said she had experienced it only to please him. She said she believed she had incurred mortal sin for all her acts and claimed to have confessed them, although intentionally not well, to a Jesuit who had since left for Spain. By claiming this she attempted to persuade the Inquisitors that she was not totally devoid of shame and that she had endeavored to cleanse her conscience. She also rebutted Plata’s accusation that she had given him all the reasons for considering their behavior not really sinful. While admitting having been “blinded” by the Devil, she laid partial blame on her suitor for their search to find an appropriate cover-up.

Under pressure by the attorney, the nun provided more details about her sexual encounters, corroborating that the kissing, petting, and provocative exchange of words had taken place. She eventually also acknowledged pollution or sexual pleasure. Her confession was based on the testimony provided by Fr. Juan, and therefore, she was not obliged to enter into the many details that had been extracted from him, although she had to confess to having sexual relations with him twice in fifteen days. By not forcing her to go into all the details of their relationship, as Fr. Juan had been, the authorities paid some small respect to her gender. A nun, as a woman, was not expected to reveal sexual secrets to male authorities, and was assumed to be protected by a natural measure of modesty. The most surprising part of her confession was her denial that she had been a virgin. She stated she had lost her virginity “in the house of her father,” in other words, before age eighteen and before entering the convent. While nothing was added to this revelation, the knowledge that this bride of Christ was not a virgin explains, in part, her behavior, as a woman who had known carnal pleasures and was prone to remember them. It also suggests that her choice of profession may have been the result of an early and shameful sexual relationship. The attorney showed no interest in investigating how she had lost her virginity or who had taken it. It was not part of his case.⁵⁶ Sor Agustina spent the rest of her life incarcerated in the convent, punished for her sins. The fate of Fr. Juan Plata remains unknown.

Since this case took place in the late sixteenth century and only one more case of proven seduction surfaced after it, one may assume that although the problem of sexual misconduct in the confessional or in the convent was not solved, nunneries and ecclesiastic authorities took stronger precautions to prevent their recurrence. On the other hand, sexual activity and seduction of lay women, not nuns, by friars and priests remained a problem for the church throughout the entire colonial period. The second known case of sexual relations between a nun and a friar was not detected until 1693, almost one hundred years after Sor Agustina and Fr. Juan confessed to theirs. The case of Augustinian Fr. Pedro de la Cadena and Sor Antonia de San José of the convent of Jesús María went one step further than that of Sor Agustina and Fr. Juan, since she became pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl.⁵⁷ Fr. Pedro was the nephew of one of the most powerful men in the Augustinian Order, Fr. Diego Velázquez de la Cadena. This case was not reviewed by the Inquisition, where secrecy was guaranteed. It was undertaken by Archbishop Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, a stern upholder of public morals who probably decided to give the greatest degree of “publicity” to it for the “edification” of the laity. As an archbishop Aguiar y Seijas had jurisdiction over the nunnery and he apparently took advantage of his situation to pursue his objective of educating the public about such transgressions. He was also possibly interested in embarrassing the Augustinian Order, which had become a powerful, rich Order involved in much worldly ostentation and corruption.⁵⁸ At least this was the opinion of some members of the Augustinian Order who regretted the loss of honor and public credit of the persons involved.

This case resulted from the dreaded “*devociones de monjas*,” that all ecclesiastical authorities condemned as leading to unbecoming, deeper personal involvements. Sor Antonia had professed in Jesús María in 1685, after spending some time in San José de Gracia. She had met Fr. Pedro only four days before entering the convent as a novice, at which time he showed amorous interest in her, but she proceeded with her profession and eventually took the veil. Only four months after her profession she saw him again while she watched a procession from the roof of the convent, a custom that some prelates decidedly proscribed, but one that the nuns continued to follow. They returned to their “friendship” through the forbidden visits in the parlor and conversation in the torno. Others before and after them continued to engage in this practice, which seemed to be an endemic problem throughout the seventeenth century. Having being admonished by the tornera against such encounters, Sor Antonia asked another nun, a close friend and protector, for the use of her cell, which was really a small house within the convent. One of its walls was contiguous to a house outside the cloister, which Fr. Pedro began to visit. Between both of them they opened a hole in the wall through which they talked. Although their relationship stopped for over a year, on account of her suspicion that he stayed to sleep in the house with some women, they reinitiated it, and this time they went beyond the boundaries of self-restraint. They opened a hole large enough for him to enter into the cell and they began a sexual relationship. It lasted four years before she became pregnant, possibly at the beginning of 1693, since she gave birth in October of that year. According to witnesses, no sooner had he learned of her condition than he disengaged himself from his paramour, delegating to some friends the problem of maintaining the secrecy and finding a midwife for the birth, and a godfather for his baby. For the pre- and postpartum care the nun dressed herself as a secular and accepted the help of two women, who passed her off as a single woman in a bad situation during the delivery and the postpartum treatment; this included a visit to a steam bath outside the

convent after the fortieth day.

Throughout the length of this affair, Sor Antonia had the help of a protector within the convent, Sor María de la Trinidad, owner of the cell in which she carried on her relations with the friar, and who could not bring herself to denounce the relationship because she had adopted Sor Antonia as her protégée within the convent. This case was an absolute nightmare for the convent and for the Augustinian Order, as well as an excuse for the archbishop to exercise his most austere discipline against both. Sor Antonia was condemned to live “jailed” in her convent for the rest of her life, and as she died in 1719, she must have spent at least twenty-five years in that condition. Fr. Pedro was condemned to perpetual jail within a monastery of his Order after having been tried by his peers. The baby left no tracks but it may have been adopted by her godfather, a customs accountant. There are no vivid personal details about the sexual aspect of this case, as in that involving Fr. Juan Plata and Sor Agustina, but it was obviously a “great gossip” which found its way into the local “newspaper” of the period.⁵⁹ The nuances of this case are social, as it involved the exposure of the case by ecclesiastic authorities and the embarrassment of a mendicant Order that had become powerful and rich in the capital of the Vice-Kingdom. One of the attorneys in the case acknowledged “devociones” as a devilish abuse. “If a woman is alone in the locutorio with a man with whom one supposes a lascivious love, what will they do, or rather, what will they not miss doing?” This unique case proved that some of the worst nightmares of prelates and preachers of canonical observance could take place—if only once. The transgression of all rules established to prevent the possibility of an amorous relationship between a nun and a man was most often broken by men of the cloth because they were the ones who had the greatest opportunity of coming close to the brides of Christ, and had the most intimate knowledge of their psychological and spiritual inner worlds.

THE CRUX OF THE PROBLEM

All female convents had within themselves vulnerable areas where the very essence of sacrality could be challenged and undermined. The confessional was the most obvious and the most dangerous place, and remained the most common locus of erotic exchange. The visiting parlors were ancillary spaces of contact that could be debased by willing agents. Even the cells in which nuns lived, their most private space, could be penetrated in critical times, such as during sickness. Physical proximity encouraged the potential misuse of the confessor’s spiritual fatherhood to awaken and engage the unexpressed sexuality of his daughters as well as arouse his own.

Since women were the primary denouncers of their potential “seducers” they were assumed to be victims, and as such their modesty was rarely questioned. However, sometimes the victim was the confessor. Sor Gertrudis Felipa de San Joaquín, a discalced Carmelite in Guadalajara, admitted “errors” in her belief in an inquisitorial process that began in 1700 and continued through 1704. In addition to confessing mistaken canonical interpretations, she also admitted having falsely accused D. Martín de Figueroa of soliciting her in the confessional. She had denounced that he had held her hand, had talked to her about impure love, and given her a “dirty paper” [letter] conducive to indecorous solicitation.⁶⁰ By 1704 she was willing to swear that her statement had been a lie and that she had been led to her action by her ill will and desire to harm him. She begged the Holy Office to pardon her as “a flimsy girl, and as a woman, belonging to the weak sex and especially fragile.” The Inquisitors decided that she ought to be severely reprimanded but authorized her confessors to absolve her. Nearly one century later, in 1804, Sor María Josefa de Santa Brígida, of Santa Catarina de Sena, Puebla, who was charged of disbelief in the dogmas of the faith, also confessed that she had falsely accused a confessor of solicitation. For this she was verbally chastised.⁶¹ The Inquisitors treated these cases as examples of “melancholy,” a form of psychological stress characteristic of the female sex. The nuns were never questioned on the reasons for wanting to defame the confessors. Treating women as diseased was a comfortable position for ecclesiastical authorities and perpetuated the belief that they were less responsible for their actions.

It is evident that regardless of whether the nuns were or were not receptive to the advancements of the confessors, the dominating authority of the latter was always a serious concern for them. Confessors could impress, inhibit, or entice them. Some nuns questioned the propriety of their confessor’s behavior, but they felt bound to them by the obedience prescribed by the church. Even those who refused to be caught in the snare of sexual harassment suffered with patience the attention of their “fathers” until they could bear the tension no longer. They performed their female deferential role, which demanded respect, modesty, and forbearance. For some who allowed themselves the luxury of an affair with their confessors, their relationship became so eroded by their own inhibitions that it soon collapsed under the weight of guilt for having betrayed their “true divine husband.” This feeling is best captured by a poem attributed to a late eighteenth-century nun, and recorded in an inquisitorial suit.

What terrible blindness/What wild error/ But the Sacred Redeemer/ Called me in his forgiveness/ My Redeemer, forgives/
Such bad intent/ imagined by my passion. . . .

Lord I have returned to you/ with the finest of my passion/ I have abandoned the path/ Of dirty malice/ Your sacred passion/
Has led me to you again . . .

I have recovered your glorious shelter/ May I be lucky to receive your favors/ I love you again/ With all my heart/ And in
religion/ I will remain your slave forever.⁶²

While the sexuality of the nuns is sometimes opaque and confused, the nature of the solicitants’ desire is clearer, since they had the freedom of expression and the power of their rank. Theirs was a manipulative and exploitative desire. The facility with which they handled love expressions in those letters that were obtained by the Inquisition suggests the extent of their experience in the art of writing and wooing.⁶³ The church repeatedly condemned all possible erotic relations between priests and nuns by defining, over and over again, that sexual abstinence meant a total rejection of any form of expressed sexual interest. Such repeated admonitions implied the existence of active sexuality among its membership. When confronted with transgression, church attorneys, seeking to weed out reprehensible male behavior, resorted readily to the stereotype of male aggressiveness. Summing up his case against Fr. Juan Plata, the Inquisition’s attorney stated that he had “reduced the nun to his will.” This meant that the Holy Office preferred to see men, even those of the cloth, as seducers, and women as innocent, passive victims. Exceptional cases, such as that of Fr. Juan Plata and Sor Agustina, in which the nun was a consenting and active party, were not supposed to be the rule. In questioning her, the Inquisition’s attorney was determined to find out if she had clearly understood the implications of her behavior. His emphasis was on the intellectual comprehension of her conduct rather than on its physical consequences. A sin committed was an action in the past. A sin understood moved the penitent to repentance and contrition, the venues to wash the impurities of the past and move forward toward grace. While this was expected of all penitents, the attorney’s indictment suggested that she had been more a victim of her own weakness than her sensuality to ease her into contrition and repentance.

The sexual nature of the bodies of the members of the church, male or female, could not be expunged by the vows. Sexual desire lurked in the

confessionals and other areas of the convents. It was brought inside by men who could not get rid of their own desires, and who found a variety of responses among their spiritual daughters. The relationship of nun and confessor was formally covered under a fictional affinal father-daughter relationship, but in reality the bond simply put a man and a woman in a situation that could generate an erotic-sexual tension. The tenets of Christian spirituality were bound to be misrepresented by some of its proponents because of the intrinsic difficulty of separating flesh from spirit when spiritual love was described in terms that conflated both, and when the soul was conceived profoundly embedded into the body. The church often assumed a misogynist position in its reading of sexuality, but, in principle, the Inquisition did not favor one gender over the other. In fact, in dealing with deviant confessors who harassed the brides of Christ, the responsibility for desecrating the church's mandates was always placed on the men. Nuns' sexuality was a thorny issue better to be avoided, but when it was raised in hagiographical texts, it was the source of strength and resolve to fight it. Didactic tracts, while acknowledging the possibility of sensuality and warning the brides of Christ against them, assumed that they could and would fight them with diligence and eventually succeed in curbing them.⁶⁴

The assumption that sexuality in the cloisters was heterosexual in nature seems to be overwhelming. The possibility of homoerotic relations among nuns was not frontally discussed. The Inquisition files offer no evidence of any such case being brought to its attention. Yet, the issue of "special friendships" among nuns intrigues some present-day readers. The friendship of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz with the Vicereine Countess of Paredes has been interpreted to suggest a homoerotic relationship, although the term did not exist in the seventeenth century.⁶⁵ Based on circumstantial evidence such as the nature of her poetry, historians are reluctant to accept this theory. On the other hand, bonding among women in a completely female universe was to be expected, although those involved may not have understood their relationship as homoerotic. Under the rubric of "special friendships" we may have a hint of liaisons among some nuns, although the evidence is sparse. Writing for Spanish nuns in the seventeenth century, Fr. Antonio Arbiol, a well-read theologian, conceded the possibility of dubious bonds among women. He suggested the existence of both indecent friendships with ecclesiastics and lay men and "imperfect and reprehensible friendships that some religious have with each other."⁶⁶ Yet, as he explains the nature of the latter, he addressed the political aspect of such friendships, not their sexual nature. Quoting Santa Teresa, who had rejected friendship among conventual sisters, he expressed concern about the creation of cliques (*parcialidades*) formed as novices were "mothered" by nuns who shaped these "special friendships" and who expected the new nuns to belong to "their" party, as opposed to other nuns' coteries. Such relationships became a nuisance in the proper government of the convent and created enmities within. He recommended that any novice entering the convent under the patronage of a nun be separated from her after profession, and also warned against the formation of groups of sisters and relatives living in the same convent. Any affective bond with any other "creature of this world" was "imperfect." Only the love of God was perfect.⁶⁷ Doubtless these guidelines were preached among nuns in New Spain, but we know that they were not always obeyed, and that nuns continued to "mother" each other and formed groups that sought votes in elections, and defied their prelates' orders.⁶⁸ Could it be that among "imperfect relationships" were some based on an undesirable sexuality? What could have been such a liaison is described in Fr. Felix de Jesús María's biography of seventeenth-century Conceptionist Sor María de Jesús. He presented Sor María as a strong-minded woman who corrected an unsound relationship between two nuns in her convent:

This love was a miserable source of disgust and dissensions because they [the nuns] had made a reciprocal pact of their hearts . . . thus resulting in a particular love that was an offense to the rest.... The servant of God [Sor María], horrified by such love that kindles the flames of jealousy to burn religious souls, chastised the one about whom we talk . . . and put a rosary around her neck. She succeeded in breaking her apart from that personal friendship.⁶⁹

This unusual reference to profound affection between two nuns is inconclusive, but we must remember that a religious biographer of the period would use circumlocutions to prevent any offense to his readers. Another suggestive and similarly inconclusive story comes from the Inquisition records. It concerned the alleged connection between a nun from Jesús María, Sor María Josefa Ildefonsa, and a young man who pretended to be a "magician" and promised to help her leave the convent. She admitted that she had had an "unsound friendship" (*mala amistad*) with a servant called María Gertrudis, who had decided to leave the convent, and she wanted to go with her because she did not want to become separated from her.⁷⁰ The "magician" was recruited by an errand woman, and he offered to help her get out of the convent and find a place for both. The irresolute nun decided not to follow the servant when the latter left and eventually confessed the whole incident to the Inquisition at the instigation of her own confessor. María Josefa Ildefonsa was only eighteen years old when this incident took place in 1794. Was the fondness for the servant a youthful attachment of an inexperienced girl? A reprehensible friendship was one that became more profound than the love of God and the convent, but for an eighteen-year-old the reality of affection in another young woman could have indeed created an affinity that she was as yet unprepared to feel for God. The idea that she could "leave" the convent was totally erroneous, because for a professed nun that option did not exist.

The exposure and punishment of sexual misconduct among the brides of Christ was an important institutional practice to preserve the very foundation of their state: their physical separation from the common run of women and their detachment from the impurity of sex in their mystical marriage to the Savior. This group of women had to be surrounded by the shield of respect demanded by their chosen state, but neither cloister nor vow of chastity were perfect deterrents to the curiosity some nuns could develop toward their own potential for human love. The breaking of the vow of chastity in terms of sexual misbehavior was the only script provided by the church itself. For nuns, love as human emotion was theoretically channeled toward Christ and God, the absent groom, while human love (even to members of the family) was shunned and regarded as unsuitable and even disrespectful of the bond already established with God. There was no place for spiritual personal love to another person. Should it happen, it was regarded as love born of the body, and therefore an irrational impulse connoting betrayal and unworthiness. They were taught that love toward a man was sinful and the product of a demonic trap to ensnare their souls via their bodies. No wonder it inspired so much apprehension if not fear among nuns, as expressed in self-denunciations.

The cases studied in this chapter indicate that personal attraction toward men did exist in the female cloisters as a result of a variety of situations triggered by curiosity and the appeal of the forbidden. Engagement in affective ties with a confessor also filled some obvious needs not satisfied by the spiritual ties to their holy groom. Whether nuns rejected or engaged in a net of affective relationships depended on their personality and confidence in their beliefs. Considering the hundreds of women who professed during the colonial period, the number of registered cases of sexual misconduct is small and indicates that the greatest danger to nuns' sexual chastity was not posed by lay men or devociones, as ecclesiastic authorities constantly reiterated. While in a few instances secular friendships seemed to have triggered some minor problems, the most difficult moral challenges were the result of the nuns' intimate contacts with their own spiritual fathers, their confessors, who acted simply as sexually driven men. The Holy Office investigating these incidents followed the same exacting practices it applied to sacramental transgressions, but only in extreme cases was it able to

effectively punish it. Despite the Holy Office's official abhorrence of sexual misconduct among its own members, the punishment was rarely commensurate with the sin. During the trial the men were imprisoned, but after the suit concluded, the most frequent punishment was separation from their confessional duties with women, and sometimes the obligation to undergo a period of reclusion in their convents under spiritual advice.⁷¹ The women, enclosed in their convents, suffered shame in the rest of the community, and their punishment seems to have had more profound repercussions to them as members of a closed community in which everyone's gaze was fixed on individual transgressions.

The study of these cases takes us beyond the construction of models of hagiographical perfection, and lets us appreciate the rhetoric that supported an imaginary world of angelic beings. It also makes nuns, friars, and priests more "human" and closer to a reality filled with desire and passion. Sexuality is only one chapter in the history of inquisitorial surveillance of the female convents. Another chapter was that of nuns who self-accused themselves of lacking faith or suffered spiritual doubts that not even confessors were able to solve to their own personal satisfaction.⁷² But despite their undeniable interest, problems of a sexual nature were not the most common ones for nuns. Far more pressing were the problems of governance and relations with the male prelates which, as seen in past chapters and reviewed again in Chapter 9, could produce considerable clashes of will and unrest in the convents. Notable among the issues that remained under the surface of most public and private activities was that of race. While part of the personal and social consciousness of race surfaced in the admission process and in the treatment of servants and slaves, there was a chapter in the history of nuns in Mexico that revealed the complexities of race perception among those who wore a religious habit. In the following chapter, the same ecclesiastical authorities and the same nuns who worried so much about the preservation of monastic chastity will be seen as actors in a momentous turn in the foundation of nunneries in the viceroyalty, the creation of convents for indigenous women. These newcomers to monastic life tested their Christian spirit of inclusiveness and agape, and showed that the prejudice of race, deeply embedded in their conventual life, was just as troubling as the confrontation with sexuality.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Indian Brides of Christ

“No, Teodora has not died. She lives; yes she does. She lives because her fame lives; she will be immortal. She lives because the memory of her talents and virtues is for you, for her Indian peers, and for all of us, her compatriots, a combination of perfumes, whose softness and fragrance delight us.”



In a 1799 memorial service, Don Joseph Victoriano Baños y Domínguez, a highly placed priest in the city of Oaxaca, sang the praises of the abbess of the disclaled nuns' Indian convent of Our Lady of the Angels to her contrite sisters. As a paragon of religious virtues, he saw in her a model not just for Indians but for all people in New Spain, and even in the entire American continent. Thus, nearly 280 years after the conquest of Mexico, an Indian woman was extolled as an icon of Christian observance, *within* the church. This eulogy represented the end of a long cycle of history that began with a rotund negative to the question some early missionaries posed to themselves: Could an Indian woman become a nun? Why did it take so long to admit indigenous women to religious life as nuns of the black veil—fully entitled to all the rights and duties of life in the convent?

After two long centuries of denying Indian women admission to the cloisters, the foundation of Corpus Christi in 1724 was unexpected and surprising, given the paucity of leads behind it. The admission of Indian nuns to conventual life marked a watershed in the history of women as well as in ecclesiastical and social history. The essential whiteness demanded for profession was finally broken. In opening the door to women of a different race, the church became more inclusive by conceding that indigenous women had the spiritual aptitude to follow the rigors of religion as well as receive its benefits. Thus, the story of the foundation of convents for Indians inserts the element of race within the parameters of gender and class, and sheds light on the adoption of a pattern of European spirituality by the indigenous elites of Mexico.

Viceregal support for the first Indian nunnery suggests the opening of some minds to change in social perceptions. This foundation may be seen as the first call of the Enlightenment in its desire to channel the indigenous into the Western pattern of thought and social behavior, despite the fact that there was not universal support for such change, as the tug-of-war over the reception of whites in the Indian convent demonstrates. For the indigenous communities the acceptance of its women as brides of Christ was a welcomed sign insofar as those who entered symbolized them all. There were social restrictions applied to Indian women that favored the elite and eliminated the poor among them, but elites were pleased by the recognition of their status, while commoners probably knew their place and accepted the hierarchical distinction that implied their absence from among the elected. The Indian convents followed the same social rules and adopted the same spiritual values as the white convents. They did not introduce anything specifically “indigenous” in their observance and by so doing bought their ticket into the body of the elect. The relaxation of social and spiritual inhibitions dating back to the sixteenth-century definitely invigorated the role of the church among the Indians, and brought down the reluctance shown by sixteenth-century indigenous families to relinquish their women to the church. Ultimately, race, class, and gender concepts that had unfavorably affected Indian women were challenged and changed to a significant degree.

During the first years of evangelization, friars tinkered with the idea of conventual life for indigenous women, but they soon abandoned it in favor of religious indoctrination and education for home life. However, this decision did not imply that if Indian women proved capable of sustaining a strong Christian spiritual life they would be allowed to profess in a women's monastic community. In the sixteenth century Indians were still neophytes in the eyes of the church and unready to embrace the spiritual and physical demands of religious life. However, while male Indian nobles began to receive indoctrination and education to facilitate a rapid religious and cultural adjustment to Spanish values, their female counterparts remained on the margins of that effort. Gender conspired against women, who were not expected to be as educated as men and, therefore, less prepared to undertake the rigors of religious observance after conversion. In the sixteenth century the colonizer was unready to give the women of the colonized access to a state that carried with it one of the highest statuses in society.

Between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, few opinions were voiced on the subject of profession for Indian women, but examples of devout Indian women began to break down the apathy and even opposition to that possibility. The acceptance of the notion of Indian nuns lay in the solution of two key problems. The first was to define what guidelines would suit the social and economic circumstances of Indian women. Most of them were not only in no position to pay the high dowries required to profess, but they lacked status in a society highly conscious of rank and distinction. The second was how to prevent the inevitable frictions caused by race relations if Indians and Spaniards shared the same convents. Once Indians professed under the tutelage of white nuns, the control of their own convents became a political issue fueled by underlying racial prejudices.

INDIAN WOMEN AS RELIGIOUS: GENESIS OF A CONCEPT

There was no clear-cut boundary between education, enclosure, and true religious life when the first Bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, devised a plan to educate indigenous women to become potential models of good Christian behavior for their communities. In 1529, Zumárraga reported a cloistered house in Texcoco, led by a Spanish matron, where a great number of the widows and daughters of the Aztec nobility and their administrators, daughters of lords, and principal persons, entered willingly to receive basic instruction in Christianity by some older women.¹ Given the chaotic circumstances of the city at that time, these women, uprooted from their houses and ancestral traditions, may have been simply seeking the protection of

the friars in the Texcoco institution.²

Some Franciscan friars seemed to have thought that indigenous women had the mettle to become nuns, just as they were hopeful that some of the young men could become friars.³ Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún was among them. Having learned how “in the times of idolatry” women served in the temples under a vow of chastity, he thought that they had the aptitude to be nuns and keep perpetual chastity. To this effect he advised the foundation of women’s monasteries and congregations.⁴ Bishop Zumárraga’s plan for a cloistered school could have been modeled after those in Spain, but it is doubtful that the concept of a nunnery, such as known in Spain, was in Zumárraga’s mind.⁵ The women whom he encouraged to travel to New Spain in two different groups, in the early 1530s, to direct the school abandoned their tasks shortly after arriving. A second group, personally selected by Zumárraga and arriving in 1534, was identified as “teachers,” and would educate the girls in Christian principles and the “womanly arts,” and even though the comparison with nuns appeared several times in official documents, the Spanish women were expected to stress the discipline of learning and the enclosure the Indian girls should keep until they were ready to get married. Zumárraga’s attention to male education was based on the belief in the intellectual capacity of Indians (*los naturales de la tierra*) to accept and assimilate Spanish academic and higher education, which was regarded as a male, not a female, resource. By 1532 boys were being taught Latin, and in 1536 a special center for higher education, the college of Santa Cruz, opened in Tlatelolco. One year later Zumárraga and the bishops of Oaxaca and Guatemala apparently attempted to revive the flagging girls’ schools by looking for some Spanish women willing to teach Indians and mestizas.⁶

Zumárraga did not encounter strong parental opposition for the education of boys, but he had to resort to force to get some girls for his schools. At the bottom of this opposition seemed to have been the fact that the girls were instructed in Spanish ways and that men refused to marry them, as reported later by Zumárraga himself. Women instructed by the Spanish teachers expected men to be the breadwinners, while indigenous society expected women to work for their husbands, although cacique, or principal, Indian women were not supposed to work at all. The families’ opposition may have been over a deeper cultural conflict on the importance of controlling the education of women, who were assumed to preserve the indigenous identity of the community and the home. When a joint letter of the bishops requesting cloistered nuns—not lay beatas—to conduct the indoctrination task was rejected by the Crown, the matter of Indian women’s enclosure for instruction or any other purpose was closed.⁷ Neither the Spanish nor the indigenous conceptualization of women’s social and familial role seems to have had points of agreement.⁸

When the first convent for women in New Spain, Nuestra Sra. de la Concepción, was founded around 1540, it was dedicated to women of Spanish descent, even though two mestiza daughters of Isabel de Moctezuma were admitted shortly after their mother’s death.⁹ Since its outset, La Concepción had two purposes: to shelter the female offspring of Spanish descent, and to provide those who heard a religious call with a venue to satisfy it. The initial ecclesiastical concern over the fate of indigenous women switched to a concern over the fate of women of Iberian stock, who could be exposed to the risks of a society still bearing the stamp of violence and sexual jeopardy for women of the elite.

Even though La Concepción’s strict racial lines became the model that all ensuing foundations were to follow to the letter, some mestizas may have lived in the nunneries toward the end of the century. The Third Provincial Council of ecclesiastic authorities (1585) ordered that mestizas wishing to be admitted in a convent, preceding the consent of the authorities, should not be asked for a higher dowry than was demanded from the rest.¹⁰ This prohibition suggests that: a) mestizas required special ecclesiastical permission to be admitted as novices, and b) that they were asked to pay a higher dowry than españolas, another deterrent to their entrance. But, if there were mestiza nuns in the convents of New Spain at the end of the sixteenth century, they remained discreetly invisible to the population and the historical records.¹¹ The most notably visible Indian women in the convents were servants. Even Indian men suffered the rejection of the mendicant orders. The 1585 Third Provincial Council, which set the ecclesiastical rules for most of the colonial period, reiterated the prohibition of admitting Indians to the mendicant orders, although its language was toned down by the Vatican. If the Indian race, as represented by its men, was regarded as unprepared for religious life, women merited no special concern and were not discussed at all.¹²

The issue of Indian women was raised again in the late sixteenth century by men such as Jesuit scholar Joseph de Acosta who, in the late 1580s, discussed the temporary enclosure of Aztec women for services to their gods, and praised their exercise in penitence, their discipline in carrying out their tasks, their honesty, and their chastity. However, as everything else pre-Columbian, he regarded those practices as a trick of Satan, who loved to steal good things from the true God.¹³ In the mid-seventeenth century, Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, a Carmelite chronicler of Puebla, reiterated the idea that pre-Columbian “nuns” were priestesses dedicated to the worship of the Devil. He thanked God for the fact that the very same place where such women had practiced their “monstrous ceremonies” was then occupied by the Carmelite nunnery, a place sheltering true “celestial” virgins.¹⁴ Denying the validity of the pre-Christian good conduct of Indian women deprived their culture of any value as a step toward Christian profession and monastic life.

HAGIOGRAPHY: AN AVENUE TO INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

The defensive reaction of church authorities to the apparition of the virgin known as Guadalupe, to a humble Indian man, indicates that in the early seventeenth century the ecclesiastical hierarchy was unready to accept an Indian-based worship separate and different from the orthodox saints brought from Spain. Despite the initial rejection of the worship of this apparition, its indisputable significance and importance grew throughout the seventeenth century, and it reopened the discussion of the aptitude of the indigenous people for Christian spirituality and their ability to understand in full the premises and practice of religious life.¹⁵ The apparition of Guadalupe did not change the policy of exclusion of Indian women from profession.¹⁶

However, in the seventeenth century the concept of Indian spiritual protagonism began to strengthen with the example of men and women living a life infused with the virtues of holiness and devotion. If they could offer spiritual “proofs of grace,” such as visions, or live secular lives committed to observance and piety, they would be recognized as fully mature for religious life. In the more intimate and familiar grounds of *sujeto* and *cabecera* towns, single and married women were active members of the church and assumed important governing roles within confraternities.¹⁷ In their communities their spiritual authority was recognized as they were entrusted with the preservation of “holy things” or recognized as mothers of the people in holy matters. Yet, their aptitude for higher spiritual enterprises needed recognition from the men who ruled the church beyond the boundaries of the Indian towns. A small body of writings on Indian piety developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These narratives indicate the gradual inclusion of individual indigenous religious experience in the corpus of the church’s hagiographic tradition, and were a critical counterbalance to the persistence of “idolatrous” practices and the many doubts raised on the reliability of Indian conversion to Christianity.¹⁸ When Carmelite and Dominican chroniclers extolled the example of some notably devout Indian men, a few women were included. This meant that women would have their models of piety beyond the many humble activities that they carried out on behalf of church and the faith.¹⁹

Praise for female Indian spirituality began to be given in the form of short biographical and hagiographical testimonies, which helped to inscribe the figure of indigenous women in the printed memory of the established religious order. Religious hagiography was the medium used by male writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to present models of exemplary womanhood and spirituality to a readership that accepted the protagonism of women when it came wrapped in the mantle of religion.²⁰ In his 1688 chronicle of his Order, Mercedarian Fr. Francisco de Pareja left a brief account of the life of an Indian woman known as Madre Juana de San Jerónimo, who probably died around 1590.²¹ Dominican Fr. Alonso Franco reprinted her story, calling her a beata. As oral tradition would have it, her confessors held her in such great esteem that they called her one of the souls reaching the highest of perfections in her time.²² She was credited with knowing how to write and having the ability of prediction. Franco took the opportunity to pontificate on the equality that Christianity imparted to all people before the eyes of God. Neither white, nor black, nor Indian, rich or poor, was denied a place in his kingdom. A celebration of the humble of this world was to be a key rhetorical venue to make an intellectual and spiritual space for those who still occupied the lowest rank in Novohispanic society.

Fr. Francisco de Pareja also recalled in greater detail the generous patronage of Clara María, who owned several truck-garden properties near the water springs of Chapultepec. She had an oratory (*santo calli*) where she kept many religious icons and paid pious reverence to them. Persuaded by Fr. Cristóbal de Cervantes and Fr. Francisco de Solís, she became a “benefactor” of the Order by donating her house for a future Mercedarian convent in 1626.²³ For ten years she and the rest of the indigenous community provided the friars with food and labor force for the maintenance of the convent with the liberality “of a great lady.” When her marriage went wrong, she lost much of her previous wealth, but the convent repaid her generosity by providing for her. Clara María lived to be eighty, and at her death the Franciscans of Mexico City, and the friars of Bethlehem, joined hands to give her a special burial in the nunnery of San Juan de la Penitencia, founded in the Indian barrio of Mexico City, and which she had also benefited with her charity. Clara María’s burial in the convent’s church was an act of spiritual piety but meant nothing in terms of social change. Indians’ labor and charity provided the church with means of support and survival, but their social and racial status remained unchanged. The colonial social elite were unwilling to remove the obstacles placed before the profession of Indians, especially Indian women.

It is not surprising that the next person to write two biographies of Indian women blessed with a high degree of faith and grace was Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, chronicler of the Conceptionist convent of Jesús María in Mexico City. He had a strong respect for New Spain’s identity, and the virtues of people born in the Indies. His appreciation of the nobility of some pre-conquest societies, and his willingness to accept the possibility of God’s choice of women as preferred venues of sanctity, explain why he included Indian women in his writing without any intellectual inhibition.²⁴ He regarded professed women as efficacious venues of divine favor, assuming that God had distributed his bounty of grace among all people regardless of gender and race. Without breaking the conventions of his time, his history of the convent of Jesús María in Mexico City cited two Indian women as ideal examples of Mexican womanhood. From among the many obscure women who populated the nunneries of the seventeenth century, he selected the stories of Petronila de la Concepción and Francisca de San Miguel as models of piety worth remembering.²⁵

Petronila de la Concepción was born in Xochimilco, south of Mexico City. Her date of birth and the identity of her parents are unknown. When she was between ten and twelve years of age, she escaped her home and went straight to the convent of Jesús María, begging to enter as a servant. She had always wanted to be “saintly.” However, once in the convent she became very fond of a nun and developed a “special friendship” (*amistad particular*) with her. Such ties between religious and their servants could be established despite the social gaps separating mistress and servant.²⁶ However, in the eyes of the prelates, this kind of affective relationship could jeopardize her vocation and that of the nun. As the story goes, while praying to God to give her enough courage to abandon this friendship, the image of Christ extended his hand and touched Petronila’s heart, passing to her through this symbolic gesture the fire of divine love that would burn there forever, and signaling her for special mission. “Signaling” was a significant feature in seventeenth-century spirituality. That touch sealed her fate and, more importantly, raised Petronila to the rank of white women who had received a unique token from God before or after committing themselves to religion. For an Indian woman to have such unique contact with Christ was an unusual privilege.

Divine favor was tested again when she had to leave the convent temporarily due to sickness. After she recovered, she attempted to reenter the convent, but was denied access by the gatekeepers (*porteras*). It was not customary to welcome back servants who had left the cloister. Praying to the Virgin Mary for help, she received it, and was readmitted to the convent. Her meritorious life prompted Sor María de la Concepción, her mistress, to ask that Petronila be given the “simple vows” reserved for *donadas*. *Donadas* had no special rights in the convent, but were recognized as perpetually devoted to religion. Once dedicated by this special bond, they did not leave the cloisters. The convent thus gained her service forever. However, the possibility of being received as a *donada* was extraordinary for the humble woman. According to Sigüenza, she inflicted “horrible penitence” on herself, a rite of purification that she offered in exchange for the privilege of being officially accepted into “religion.” After her “profession” as a *donada*, Petronila exercised herself in the same practices that made white nuns “saintly.” She observed silence, took regular corporal penitence, engaged in austere fasting and frequent prayers, and gave herself completely to God. Her behavior earned her the respect of the community, especially as she had frequent visions of the souls in Purgatory. Petronila was said to have had another extraordinary contact with the Virgin Mary, a conversation in which Mary explained to her that the great flood of 1629 was a divine punishment for the transgressions of the city, even though water was a lesser punishment than the original fire Christ had in mind for it. The abbess and the convent’s chaplain investigated this communication with the Virgin, to verify the nature of the celestial punishment and the prophecy of four more years of flooding, and found nothing reproachable in her vision. Petronila was also capable of intense meditation on the Passion of Christ wherein she lost all sensory experiences. In other words, she was represented as a full-blooded seventeenth-century visionary, familiar with divine beings, and equal in capacity and spirituality to any white nun. She died on June 27, 1667.

A second Indian, Francisca de San Miguel, was paired to a black woman, María de San Juan, in the only other chapter in Sigüenza’s book devoted to nonwhite residents in the convent.²⁷ Francisca exemplified for the writer the mystery of God’s distribution of grace among “humble and small” people. Born in Mexico City, Francisca was devoted and penitent, and had the gift of prophecy. Sigüenza believed that she had prophesied the mutiny of 1624, but gave this information less importance than the miracle that allowed the convent to enjoy a new and venerated image of Christ on the cross. Francisca was very devoted to the Passion of Christ and became obsessed with the idea of owning an image of the Crucifixion, but, as Sigüenza puts it, since she was “Indian, retired in a convent, and caring about nothing but her spiritual life,” she was too poor to afford one. The paradigm of all conventual Indian servants was succinctly presented. Race and gender determined their poverty.

Yet, God could reward the meek and exemplary with miracles such as that experienced by Francisca. One day, strong knocks at the door of the porteria introduced three Indian men, symbolically dressed in white, and carrying a life-size and very well-sculpted image of Christ on the cross. With “polite words” they asked that it be delivered to Francisca de San Miguel. The joy of the servant and the astonishment of the nuns made them forget about the messengers, who disappeared mysteriously leaving no trace of their identity. The writer leads the reader to infer that they were messengers from God. The crucifix was eventually removed from the cloister to be placed in the church of the convent for public worship. This simple “miracle”

gained Francisca a place in the memory of the convent and a bow of respect from the erudite biographer.

These efforts to insert indigenous women in the memory of the Orders were an intellectual curtsy in their direction, but they did not translate into social acceptance. The respect with which some “special” Indian saintly women were treated was not necessarily an index to the treatment of other, humbler conventual servants. Although the evidence is scant, most nuns and religious communities entertained no idea of social leverage. Nuns engaged sometimes in “maternal” roles with their servants but their patronizing attitudes could not break social barriers among them. Sor Felipa de Santiago, the daughter of a rich family in Guadalajara who professed in Jesús María, always said special prayers for the souls of Indians in Purgatory (*ánimas olvidadas*). She was said to have special access to those souls whenever she needed them to help her perform her tasks in the convent.²⁸ Piety apart, even in Purgatory Sor Felipa pictured Indians as servants on whose services she could count to solve difficulties in the convent.

The restrained admiration of female indigenous spirituality was matched by a lack of any drive to offer them admission as nuns in any convent. Juan de Palafox, as Bishop of Puebla, made a strong case for the recognition of piety and spiritual gifts as natural to the Indian peoples, and writing to Philip IV, he extolled their commendable virtues.²⁹ He praised their great piety, devotion, innocence, and humility. The dignity with which they carried their poverty seemed to him of angelical mettle. The bishop, however, was not concerned with the balance of social justice, but with the virtues that would gain the kingdom of God. On discussing the possibility of profession for Indian women, Palafox explained their inability to do so on financial grounds, rather than considering the racial ostracism imposed by the elites in New Spain. Thus, he explained, “women do not enter [the convents] to become religious due to their destitution and poverty, and lacking a dowry, they enter the convents to serve willingly and with great pleasure. They live among the religious with the greatest of virtue.”³⁰ For Palafox, just being in the convent, regardless of what level in its hierarchy, was sufficient to provide happiness and reaffirm the Indian women’s spirituality. Like other seventeenth-century men, Palafox and Sigüenza y Góngora were not moved beyond piety. They neither questioned the status of the indigenous people nor suggested any change that would make Indian women closer to full acceptance as full members of the church.

In the eighteenth century one more hagiographical piece on female Indian spirituality still relied on the stereotype of the faithful servant, despite the fact that in that century there was, finally, a break in the social and racial prejudice that had prevented indigenous women from professing. The biography of Salvadora de los Santos, an Otomí Indian, servant in the Carmelite beaterio of San José in Querétaro, was written by the Jesuit Antonio de Paredes, with the purpose of demonstrating how, through divine grace, even the coarsest of Indians, such as the Otomí, could achieve a life of piety and enjoy the special favor of God. In Paredes’ work, Salvadora de los Santos became a paragon of indigenous humility and innocence elevated by God to serve as example to those who neglected to acknowledge his word.³¹ Salvadora’s assumed natural lack of gifts was overcome by the purity of her motivation, behavior, and faith. The writer intended to cause “confusion” in the minds of “the prudent” and deliver God’s message that the humblest would gain the greatest grace.

Salvadora was born in the mines of Fresnillo in 1701, of model hardworking Indian parents. Since her earliest childhood she had showed the virtues of the “elected”: lack of vices, a natural aptitude for obedience, and the early adoption of saintly practices without any indoctrination. She received and understood divine signals, such as the premonitions of people’s deaths. She also learned how to read without any aid, an obvious sign of divine help. Her call to serve God came as a special understanding of her destiny one Christmas when she was visiting Querétaro. She promptly offered her services to the newly founded beaterio as the only means to gain entrance in the community. Accepted as a donada and perpetually committed to it, Salvadora became the pillar upon which the small community depended for many years. She provided physical labor, begged for food and alms, and took with humility the mocking laughter of those who found strange the sight of an Indian dressed in a beata habit. Her biographer praised the easiness with which she accepted the social differences that separated her from the white beatas, whom she served “as a slave since she recognized in them just souls, chosen by God for his holy service.”³² She remained a mystery for those who admired her piety, because “they could not conceive how such wealth of good actions, words and sentiment could be found in an Otomí Indian.”³³ Such remarks indicate that public opinion was still reluctant to recognize the compatibility of a lower-class Indian woman and a life dedicated to God.

The publication of Salvadora’s biography in 1763, after the foundation of two Indian nunneries, could have been a moral message to the same people who had criticized them, including members of the Society of Jesus. Paredes took the story of her pious death in 1762 as an opportunity to warn the reader about the contradictions involved in God’s will. Haughty españolas, who believed themselves to be noble and prudent, should take the example of this “despicable” and rustic (*ruda*) Indian and abandon the pleasures of this world. An Indian woman becoming a model of piety for white women was certainly a new turn in the discourse of spirituality. This biography was a critique of the prejudice held by some members of society against the possibility of Indian spirituality, an assumption buttressed by the opinions expressed by some ecclesiastic dignitaries and royal bureaucrats before the foundation of the first convent of Indian nuns. Yet, Paredes still presents Salvadora as a “wonder,” a baffling example of God’s will to humble the proud. Could this assumption change if the women involved in the religious experience came from a higher social rank that would make them comparable to españolas? Apparently, yes, for the first convent for Indian women was devoted to *cacicas*, women belonging to families of social distinction, not involved in “vile” occupations. Class was the factor that tipped the scale in favor of acceptance into the sacred halls of the church.

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the last piece of hagiography to be considered here, the biographical compilation of several Indian *cacicas* professed in the convent of Corpus Christi.³⁴ This work narrates the lives of seven women who professed in the convent of Corpus Christi, whose foundation in 1724 will be discussed below. What is common to all of them is that they are members of the native elite, all full-blooded Indians. Race is sublimated to become an asset rather than a handicap. While in previous centuries founders and patrons considered race a reason for the exclusion of Indians from the convents, the founder of Corpus Christi accepted the concept of the implicit nobility of unmixed Indian ancestry. The qualification of class was also deemed a *sine qua non* for profession, and the indispensable complement to purity of race.³⁵ Clearly, these two signifiers separated them from the crowd of servants who populated convents in earlier years.

Some of the women who professed in Corpus Christi had been sent as pupils (*educandas*) to religious convents and admitted there on account of their class. Even so, some language slips of the anonymous biographer of Corpus Christi reveal a persistent view of Indians as humble members of society. Thus, the extraordinary spiritual virtues of Sor Antonia Pérez de los Santos caused, according to the biographer, admiration in the abbess, who was pleased to see in the convent “and in a poor little Indian daughter of our father Saint Francis,” a “saintly madness” which made Sor Antonia spend her nights in prayer. In at least two other occasions the nuns are referred to as “*pobres inditas*.”³⁶ Despite such comments the families of the nuns received respectful praise for their Christian behavior and wisdom in choosing the education of their daughters. The family of Sor María Felipa de Jesús was reputed to be of “conquistador” lineage because it could be traced back to those Indians who accompanied the Spaniards to conquer Tepeaca and its vicinity.³⁷ They are constantly praised for their observant life and, in the case of María Felipa de Jesús, Sor Antonia Pérez de los Santos, and

Magdalena de Jesús, for having received the blessing of communications with Christ, which had “signaled” them for higher spiritual purposes.

RACE AND THE CALL OF GOD: A DIFFICULT ACCOMMODATION

Despite the obvious failure of church leaders in promoting change for Indian women, the irony was that, given the theological assumptions of the equality of all souls, the church was the only institution equipped to change its own position and support the foundation of a convent devoted to them. The idea of an Indian convent was put forward by the highest authority in the viceroyalty, a fact which favored its success. Baltasar de Zúñiga, Marquis of Valero and Viceroy of New Spain (1716–22), the founder of the convent of Corpus Christi for cacique Indians, was a pious man who sought spiritual help to solve “a problem” from Sor Petra de San Francisco, the daughter of well-to-do Spanish immigrants, and a novice in the Franciscan convent of San Juan de la Penitencia. Valero was troubled by the delay in the arrival of news from Spain on one of “His Majesty’s affairs,” and wrote to Sor Petra as a person with a reputation “of great virtue,” in yet another example of how nuns had a spiritual ascendancy over the laity. Sor Petra replied to the viceregal inquiry, offering her prayers and those of her community on his behalf, and “as moved by God” put an end note stating her hopes that God guided the marquis to found a convent in the honor of Saint Clare. Apparently, her suggestion caught Valero’s attention and “troubled” him enough to pay a visit to Sor Petra again and have her explain what type of convent she proposed. The outcome of this peculiar contact between viceroy and nun was his decision to found a Franciscan convent for Indian women. While Sor Petra did not promote this idea, she approved it, as it would serve God.³⁸ The viceroy never explained to anybody what had moved him to make his decision. Juan Ignacio Castorena y Ursúa, eminent theologian and eventual Bishop of Yucatan, thought that the marquis wished to celebrate the second centenary of the conquest of Mexico with this foundation.³⁹ Were this true, the irony of elevating the female of the conquered to the highest spiritual plane to “celebrate” the defeat of the Indian males cannot be overlooked. Indian women would become a symbol of the ultimate Christian conquest.

Viceroy Valero’s initiative broke with all precedents for conventual practice. The firm grip maintained by women of Spanish descent on institutional religious life was ended by a member of the very elite that had designed it. He donated 40,000 pesos for the nunnery. Since he finished his royal services shortly after the founding process began, he pursued most of the required official procedures in Spain. The marquis did not break all ties with established social patterns. Corpus Christi was reserved for full-blooded Indians of the highest social ranks, either cacique or principal, of legitimate birth, and whose parents had never engaged in “vile” occupations. Where Spanish convents forbade the profession of anybody suspected of having Muslim or Jewish antecedents, Corpus Christi ruled out only those aspirants whose parents had been condemned by any ecclesiastical authority of “idolatrous” practices.⁴⁰ In reasserting *limpieza de sangre*, the founders turned the exclusivity of the white race on its head and applied it to the ruling indigenous elite. No mestizas would be allowed to profess in Corpus Christi.

In Valero’s terms, race was no obstacle as long as it was supported by class. The stiff admission rules established by Valero were slightly relaxed for the foundation of the convent of Our Lady of the Angels in Oaxaca in the early 1780s. Bishop Joseph Gregorio Alonso de Ortigosa, writing the Rules of government for this nunnery, by then the third convent for Indians, foresaw a future potential shortage of caciques and, hoping to speed up the process of populating the convent, allowed the application of novices with one white grandparent. No other admixtures would be permitted. A slight concession was also made to class, as lesser principal aspirants were to be admitted. If the family had some social recognition, their daughters could aspire to profess, but the rejection of families engaged in vile offices was maintained.⁴¹ By the early eighteenth century, caciques had been much reduced in number, and the bishop wanted to open the door of the convent to women with social standing, albeit not complete “purity,” in their Indian ancestry.⁴²

The required investigation among religious orders for the foundation of Corpus Christi yielded contradictory results. Not all members of the church shared the view that Indians were ready to be admitted into the community of the brides of Christ. The Franciscan Order blessed it, stating that it was “of the utmost urgency.” Those Franciscan friars called to serve as witnesses on the Indian women’s natural ability to carry out the religious life reiterated their aptitude to maintain conventual observance. Women were free of some of the weaknesses that plagued Indian men, such as addiction to drinking and lack of sexual restraint. Fr. Joseph de Valderrama praised their chastity and described them as “incapable of impurity.” He expected them to be perfect religious. A priest of the parish of San Sebastián stated that the discalced life proposed for the nuns would offer no difficulty to women whose people experienced great hardship in their daily life. By “nature” Indian women were obedient, humble, and hardworking, qualities that would serve them well in religious life. Another witness, Fr. Manuel Pérez, declared that his own experience showed indigenous women to be honest and fearful of God and king. Pérez made the good qualities of the female sex extensive to the Indian polity, another important element in the construction of a loyal and virtuous community deserving of a special favor, such as the proposed convent. Allegiance to the king was critical in demonstrating understanding of their civic responsibility. For his part, Fr. Diego de Moras, a preacher in the church of Santa María la Redonda, put his finger on a sore social point as he remarked that Indian families of distinction refused to have their daughters enter convents as servants, the only choice available to them. A convent devoted to the aristocracy among Indians would be good policy and help establish closer ties between that segment of the population and the Spanish ruling class. To crown all arguments, two Franciscan nunneries in Mexico City, Santa Isabel and San Juan de la Penitencia, sent favorable reports on the character and religiosity of Indian girls. These two convents became the seedbeds from which “founding mothers” would be chosen to teach Indian novices how to observe monastic life.

The assumed “good” psychological features of the Indian race, as described by supporters, could be turned around and used against the proposed foundation, by simply selecting “bad” traits. The core of the arguments raised by the Jesuits of the College of San Gregorio were also of a psychological nature. The Jesuit report unambiguously stated that the foundation served no useful purpose to a people who had been reduced to such low social condition. San Gregorio Jesuits questioned the intellectual ability and emotional readiness of Indian women for conventual life, and suggested they had a limited capacity for spiritual life. Antonio Xavier García, S.J. admitted to having seen some good qualities for religious life such as honesty, obedience, and inclination to devotion among them. Yet their volubility, lack of sociability, and inclination to “wander around” would make enclosed communal life very difficult for Indian women. If they were admitted to religious life they should be tested for much longer than white nuns. He suggested that the building already under construction could be put to a better use to found a beaterio where, led by a spiritual teacher, Indian women could be interned and be good examples to their community. José María Guevara, S.J. and several other signatories stated that Indians possessed an unstable temperament which, along with their dim wit (*falta de luz*), was good proof that the Lord had not destined them for his service. No amount of training could redress their inability to meditate on metaphysical matters. They were also depicted as incapable of controlling their sexuality, and thus, their chastity vow. The ugly, double-headed monster of intellectual ineptitude and sexual incontinence that had stalled the process of acceptance of indigenous men in the clergy revisited the scene to taint the process for women.⁴³ Could such people be led by an abbess of the same condition, asked the Jesuits? They concluded that leadership among them would be impossible. Sixteenth-century prejudice was rekindled with a vengeance. The Jesuits had apparently not abandoned their paternalistic view of the neophytes, or their prejudice against the female sex. The mixture of race and gender was, in their eyes, totally negative.

The City Council of Mexico (*Ayuntamiento*) showed concern with economic issues. It was apprehensive about the strained economic situation of the city and the excessive demands on charity imposed by religious communities. Mexico City had too many convents and was in no need of a new one. It also mistakenly stated that the convents of La Concepción in Mexico City and Nuestra Señora de Santa Clara in Querétaro had been founded for Indians, and their lack of stamina had defeated the purpose of the founders. The Audiencia joined the City Council in its argument that the city had too many convents and that no new foundation was necessary. Attorney Pedro Malo de Villavicencio recommended that a beaterio or a hospice be founded instead of the convent, possibly taking the clue from the Jesuit opinion, whose words he seemed to echo throughout his statement. In the midst of this exchange of opinions, royal approval, dated March 5, 1724, arrived in Mexico City. The Audiencia had no choice but to reverse its position and bless the foundation of the convent of Corpus Christi, which took place in July 1724. The nunnery followed to the First Rule of Saint Clare, an observant branch of the Franciscan Order requiring no dowry from the novices. The endowment provided by the Marquis of Valero and funds expected to accrue from pious deeds were to cover the nuns' living expenses. The number of sisters living in the convent was set at thirty-three. The marquis, wishing to ratify and ensure the future compliance with his will, obtained a papal brief from Benedict XIII (1649–1730) in June 1727, confirming the exclusion of any other professants but Indians in Corpus Christi.

The first full-blown and nonhagiographic defense of the potential of Indian women for profession was published just before the opening of the convent. It was penned by a Jesuit, other Jesuits notwithstanding, the appointed Vicar General of the Indians of New Spain, the savant Juan Ignacio de Castorena y Ursúa. His qualifications in theology and experience as rector of the university and advisor to the Holy Office, among other distinctions, gave him the prestige and authority to issue an opinion on the subject. This elegant piece addressed all the objections raised by those who opposed the foundation, including members of his own religious community. He took the occasion of the publication of the life of the Iroquois convert Catarina Tegakovita, translated into Spanish by a Jesuit and published in Mexico in 1724, to build a case on behalf of Indian women in New Spain.⁴⁴ Castorena y Ursúa resorted to logic rather than to affective emotionalism, which had been the mark of the few hagiographic biographies on Indians published until then. It was an open defense (*punto apologético*) of the public service the proposed convent would render, as well as its benefit to the Indians. It also defended the intellectual and spiritual capacity of Indian women to profess. As Castorena put it, his defense was based on the “persuasion of authority, the conviction of reason, and the strength of experience.” To deny the possibility of profession to Indian women would be a denial of the infinite power of God's grace and his ability to change any quality in human nature. How could it be possible to assert that among the thousands of Indians in the archbishopric distinguished by their proven piety and devotion, there were none naturally capable of becoming a nun, he asked rhetorically? Guatemala already had an Indian beaterio with about fifty exemplary women, while in New Spain hundreds of them had lived and served in convents sustained by the greatest Christian inspiration.

To the accusation of the lack of sexual restraint of Indian women, he responded that if many widows and even widowers were accepted in religion it was impossible to deny access to Indian maidens who had never experienced any [sexual] stimulation. Indian women should not be condemned to marry without the option of taking the veil. The large number of Indian women who had already applied to be admitted in Corpus Christi proved that there were many from among whom the best could be chosen. Were they more inconstant than Spanish women in wanting to annul their marriages? His experience told him that such was not the case. He suggested that their divine husband would always remain good to the Indian nuns and that, in response, their devotion to him would remain firm.

Castorena y Ursúa also denied the contention that they would be incapable of ruling themselves. They were good at managing their own homes and even from the time of their gentility they knew how to keep discipline in their observance. He kept the theme of “Grace Triumphant,” the title of Tegakovita's biography, as a leitmotif and as a rebuttal to other Jesuits' arguments. The grace of God would give the Indian nuns means of coping with all the sacrifices and burdens of religious life. They had already learned Latin as well as any Spaniard, and nobody could truly say that they were any less deserving than any Spanish woman to have the option of profession.

Once the royal approval arrived in New Spain authorizing the foundation, founding nuns were selected from three Franciscan convents. They were white (*españolas*), and their mission was to govern the convent until the Indians were able to rule themselves. A period of twenty years was set for the eventual takeover of conventual administration by Indian nuns. Deprived of self-rule, these nuns were viewed as “neophytes” to religious life, as one Jesuit had suggested during the process of consultation about its foundation. The founding mother acting as abbess was Sor Petra de San Francisco, an older nun who died in 1728. Soon thereafter Sor María Teresa de San José assumed the direction of the convent as second abbess, a role she played until her death.

Since the opening of the convent, Sisters María de San Juan Crisóstomo and María del Sacramento, two white founding nuns, had tried to create an atmosphere of distrust about the indigenous women in an open attempt to take over the internal government. On the occasion of the profession of an Indian novice from Celaya, the two Sor Marías wrote a letter to the Franciscan Commissary and administrative head of the Order, Fr. Pedro Navarrete, echoing the negative arguments expressed by opponents of the foundation several years earlier. In view of what they assessed as the “limited understanding” of their Indian charges, they recommended that their number be reduced to fourteen—there were already eighteen Indians in the convent—as “originally planned by the Marquis of Valero.” As they put it, “The indigenous sisters are not cut for religious life because their understanding is slow. There is no hope they will make any progress.”⁴⁵ They also requested that the indigenous nuns wait eight years after profession to have a vote in the admission of novices, and sixteen to enable them to vote for the abbess. Their suggestions were tantamount to denying them key rights of all professed nuns, and handing over the administration of the convent to white nuns. The old issue of capacity for living in monastic discipline due to irrevocable biological traits seemed to be hard to uproot. Race prejudice was blatant. Sor María de San Juan Crisóstomo and Sor María del Sacramento claimed that the white nuns in the convent had assumed all the administrative responsibilities in the institution because they did not judge the Indians capable of any position in its governance.⁴⁶ Later these two nuns confessed to having been advised by several anonymous persons who saw their proposal as “beneficial to religion.”⁴⁷ Gender did not create bonding. It could easily be overcome by racism. A test of wills and beliefs was to ensue.

The letter scorning the Indian novices ignited trouble and animosity within and outside the convent. Corpus Christi's confessor, Fr. Juan de Alcaraz, rose to the defense of the indigenous nuns and sent a letter to his Franciscan superiors dismissing the accusations raised against the Indian novices and nuns as the product of feigned charity. He did not hesitate to qualify the white nuns' opinion as the product of passion and ambition, and their behavior as hypocritical in their so-called “defense of God.” He testified to the Indian nuns' ability to deal with Latin and to their devotion and observance of the Rules. Some of the friars who taught them how to conduct the Lent services were moved to tears by their demeanor.⁴⁸ Despite these arguments, Fr. Pedro Navarrete, the man with the power to determine the outcome of this internal rift, mishandled the situation and revealed his own prejudices by declaring himself in favor of accepting white nuns. He proceeded to admit several white novices who remained in the convent until the Crown settled the issue. Among them was Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, who later gained a reputation as a devout model nun.⁴⁹

In 1733, the Crown ordered an investigation of the situation. A legal suit (*recurso*) had been forwarded to the Council of the Indies protesting the violation of the papal brief that set Corpus Christi aside for Indian nuns. Of special interest was the letter written by Don Ambrosio de Mendoza, Florencio Calixto Ramírez y Mendoza, and Diego de Torres Vázquez Quapoltoche, identified as fathers of several professed nuns. They complained of the “adulteration of the religious state” committed by the Franciscan prelates who allowed the admission of white novices. Ever since the conquest, caciques had suffered “scorn, opprobrium, and injury,” as Spaniards insisted on mingling indigenous plebeians and nobles in disregard of social differences. Transparent in this argument was the Indian elite’s self-consciousness and its interest in making the Spanish authorities recognize it. The cacique nuns admitted in Corpus Christi, they argued, descended from men who had defended the rights of the Spanish king, and required no help from others “to instruct them in the path of virtue.” They also knew how to read, write, count, and pray. Indian women had been dishonored by declaring them incapable of assuming the economic, religious, and political government of their own convent. They called for the profession of the sisters of those already in the convent and the removal of the four españolas. The convent should also be removed from the Franciscan Order and turned over to the secular church.⁵⁰ The degree of self-assurance revealed by this statement is in tune with the dignity of argumentation one sees in legal suits initiated throughout the colonial period by indigenous peoples. It was also expressed on behalf of women, a sign that male Indians were prepared to have the Spanish community recognize the distinction and worthiness of their own women vis-à-vis españolas.

When, in 1743, Fr. Pedro Navarrete admitted more white novices in Corpus Christi, overriding the community’s vote, Fr. Joseph de Castro, the convent’s confessor, and Abbess María Teresa de San José went directly to the Council of the Indies.⁵¹ Diego de Torres requested of the Viceroy Count of Fuenclara (1742–46) that the white novices be removed from the convent and the whole case be investigated. Fears about the possible ethnic change of the community were not unfounded. In a personal letter to the Guardian of the convent of San Cristóbal, Fr. Pedro Navarrete justified having admitted white novices in Corpus Christi and in Santa María Cosamaloapán, the second convent founded for Indians in 1734 and located in Valladolid (Michoacán). Defending his actions, he stated his willingness to give the final profession to the white novices, but claimed his hands were tied by the Audiencia’s interference with the process and the expectation of a royal decision on the topic. Navarrete expressed his low opinion of Indian intellectual ability, referring his correspondent to the opinions of sixteenth-century savant José de Acosta, who had “established” the limited “capacity” of indigenous peoples.⁵² The acrimonious atmosphere generated by Navarrete’s actions centered on race, and he was not alone in his standing. He had the support of some members of the clergy. Diego de Osorio, a secular priest, wrote a legal opinion for Navarrete providing him with arguments suitable for an answer to Torres, for whom Navarrete had the greatest disdain, calling him “that clown.” Osorio argued that ecclesiastical affairs pertained exclusively to ecclesiastics, and seculars should never be allowed to meddle, for a flood of “useless” suits was certain to ensue.⁵³

The investigation ordered by the Crown moved slowly. The awaited royal ruling on the issue did not come until October 1745. The Crown ordered the white novices to leave the convent and forbade the admission of white aspirants under any circumstances. The Franciscan Order acted swiftly and appointed a new Commissary General.⁵⁴ The white novices were removed and transferred to other convents, and in 1748 the Commissary General reported that they had already professed elsewhere. Apparently, this did not settle the discord created by the white novices and Fr. Navarrete’s actions. In 1752, further complaints reached the Council of the Indies claiming that the Indian nuns were “mistreated” by the prelates, and calling attention to the fact that no Indian novice had been admitted to Corpus Christi in ten years.⁵⁵ It also complained of a reduction in the number of nuns from thirty to twenty-three since the places left by the white novices remained vacant. The Crown requested a general report on the convent.⁵⁶

The responses from the viceroy, Count of Revillagigedo, the Audiencia, and the Archbishop of Mexico were forwarded to the Council between December 1753 and October 1754. The viceroy was inclined to dismiss any reports against the abbess and to blame the petitioners for disturbing the peace within the convent. He suspected the “troublemaker” behind the latest insinuations of disorder in Corpus Christi was the same Diego Torres who, since the early 1730s, had become a self-appointed representative of the convent. He argued that several persons of his confidence had investigated the situation in Corpus Christi and had found the convent in peace and contented under the leadership of Sor María Teresa de San José, the white abbess who had been recently reelected and praised as a “loving mother” to her community. He also claimed to have three statements from the nuns supporting their abbess and expressing their satisfaction with the convent’s internal order. Revillagigedo praised the observance and austerity of the Indian nuns as “an example to this republic, and similar in virtue, observance, and austerity to the Spanish Capuchins.” He had made a personal visit to the convent and found its physical plant comparable in comfort to others in the city, and its church recently refurbished at a considerable cost. For his part, the Archbishop of Mexico praised the Franciscans on their stewardship and explained the lack of indigenous professions as the result of the convent having either no vacancies or lack of qualified applicants. These official reports served no purpose in clarifying the situation, since it was unlikely that the nuns—either Indian or white—would have disclosed to the viceroy any discord within the community. As official reports, they simply glossed over the facts.

The most telling part of this report was Revillagigedo’s own thoughts about the convent and its inhabitants, which showed deeply rooted distrust of both. He still questioned the value of Viceroy Valero’s foundation and his implicit trust in the future of a female Indian convent. He expressed “well founded doubts” on their ability to maintain “the exact and regular discipline of this very religious community.” Indian women were “rustic” and their upbringing was flawed by having taken place among people “retaining many superstitions and errors. Lacking strong direction they could follow notions contrary to their institute and the true doctrine and religiosity in which they live today.” To forestall such possibility he recommended that a white nun should continue as abbess after the death of the present one to prevent the community’s “decadence” and the loss of the benefits achieved under their present leadership.⁵⁷ Revillagigedo attributed the unrest experienced in the past to a lack of mutual understanding between the Indians and the Spaniards. It was well known, he argued, that the Indian nation was not “sociable” with the Spaniards. This lack of “sociability” was attributed to the Indians’ defective assimilation of Spanish culture. As in the sixteenth century, the piety and faith of indigenous women was not in doubt, but their ability for self-government and their intellectual capacity remained questionable to the highest royal officer.

The Franciscan hierarchy was intent on making an impassioned defense of its role in clearing the problems created by Navarrete’s decision, and it acknowledged that much anguish had been generated in the community “because the character of the Indians is very different from the Spaniards.”⁵⁸ That lack of sociability of the Spaniards toward the Indians was a concept that never passed through the mind of the friars or even the viceroy. The Order was extremely careful in preserving the convent as an Indian enclave. Corpus Christi remained under Franciscan jurisdiction, and after Sor María Teresa de Señor San José died in 1773 it became entirely Indian, and led by an Indian abbess. No further internal problems have been recorded and the community seemed to have lived a politically uneventful life thereafter.⁵⁹

Two other convents for Indian women were founded in New Spain before the end of the eighteenth century, Nuestra Señora de La Purísima Concepción de Cosamaloapán in Valladolid, and Our Lady of the Angels in Oaxaca. In Valladolid, Fr. Antonio José Pérez, Attorney General of the Franciscan Order, more sensitive than Fr. Pedro Navarrete to the feelings of the indigenous communities, began to work on behalf of the foundation of a second Indian convent shortly after Corpus Christi’s foundation. The city lent its support to this project, offering 12,000 pesos to help defray the costs

and subsequent living expenses of the nuns. Dr. Marcos Muñoz de Sanabria, canon of the Cathedral Church, was one of the main patrons of the convent.⁶⁰ A royal cédula for the foundation was issued on March 14, 1734. It stipulated that the founding nuns should come from the discaled Franciscans of Corpus Christi and praised the project as edifying to all, while giving the Indian nobles a venue to practice “the perfect life.”⁶¹ In 1737, the new convent was placed under the advocacy of Our Lady of the Conception of Cosamaloapán. Its founding nuns came from Corpus Christi and the Franciscan Santa Isabel in Mexico City. Thus, like its sister institution, it was not completely Indian. Commissary General Fr. Pedro Navarrete, following his standing on Indian nuns, allowed several white nuns to take vows in the convent.⁶²

Race divided the community of Nuestra Señora de La Purísima Concepción de Cosamaloapán with a bitterness similar to that experienced in Corpus Christi. In 1743 there were between nineteen and twenty-one professed religious in the convent, along with two Indian novices and two white novices.⁶³ Less than eight years after its foundation the community was already divided into factions. Some of the white founding mothers wanted to return to their convents in Mexico City, citing distrust and lack of charity among white and Indian nuns.⁶⁴ The Indians feared that accepting white novices would eventually undermine the ethnicity of the convent, and they mounted a resistance campaign within the convent. Since some of the Indian founders came from Corpus Christi, their belligerence was understandable. The white and the Indian group engaged in hostile behavior against each other, such as denying votes to a white novice; accusing the white abbess, Sor María Josefa de San Nicolás, of not observing the Rule; and other acts of daily obstruction not clearly described, but implicitly acknowledged as disruptive by the abbess as she reported them to the Franciscan Commissary General. Letters exchanged between Sor María Josefa and the Commissary Generals Navarrete and Fogueras reveal a sorry state of affairs. Commissary General Pedro Navarrete, whose obdurate battle with Corpus Christi produced so much irritation, suspected that the nuns of Cosamaloapán were supporting those of Corpus Christi in their appeal to the Audiencia.⁶⁵

No explicit racist wording is found in the epistolary exchange between abbess and Commissary General, but in March 1745 a group of twelve Indian nuns accused the white nuns of having taken over all the important governing posts, even though some of them were unqualified. One of the two Indian founders, a nun versed in Latin, was reported to be shunned and replaced in the conventual hierarchy by a white nun. It was possibly a punishment for having complained about the infiltration by white nuns.⁶⁶ The truncated letter of an anonymous Indian nun, possibly written in 1743, is the best source for assessing the feelings of this group.⁶⁷ She accused the Spanish mothers of being responsible for the lack of conventual discipline. They came from convents accustomed to a less rigorous discipline than the Indian nuns’ own. More important, however, was the appropriation of their convent. As expressed in the letter, the Spaniards “have several convents where to serve the Lord, but the poor Indians only two and see what is happening [to them]. We live in continuous fear that it will be removed from us.”⁶⁸ In this letter the nuns expressed their desire to have the convent placed under the authority of the bishop to avoid further imposition of white novices from their own Franciscan superiors. In 1745, the convent’s key patron, Muñoz de Sanabria, sided with the Indians in a letter to Provincial Juan Fogueras. In his opinion, the convent would be much better off if it were exclusively Indian, and he sought the admission and profession of several Indian novices as a cure for the problems they were experiencing. While no further information is available on the resolution of the situation, it probably took a course similar to that of Corpus Christi. Once the founding white Spaniards were removed by death, the indigenous nuns experienced no similar inner rifts.

In 1774, the Crown approved a third indigenous foundation in Oaxaca. As a predominantly Indian area, the Oaxaca foundation was eminently suited for such a convent, but the Franciscan Order was not to be its overseer. Given the experience with the existing Indian convents, the Crown showed wisdom in not having it repeated in the South. The foundation process had begun in 1744, when a group of caciques asked for a nunnery for their daughters, a sign of the speed with which the concept of convents for their women had traveled among the indigenous people. Sor María Teresa de San José, from the Mexico City convent, signed the request for the foundation, stating that Corpus Christi’ could not accommodate the numerous aspirants to profession from Oaxaca.⁶⁹

Among the early backers of the Oaxacan foundation were the Carmelite and Augustinian nuns, and the colorful and spirited prior of the convent of San Agustín, Fr. Carlos de Almodóvar, who on April 25, 1773, waxed over the possibility of founding a nunnery for Indian girls. His statements reflect the current intellectual position of some members of the church vis-à-vis the feasibility of Indian nuns. Fr. Carlos praised their vocation for religious life, especially the more rigorous First Rule of Saint Clare, citing their “wax docility, hermit poverty, true humility, and tried suffering” qualities that colonial spirituality sought among potential nuns.⁷⁰ He described them as the “light of dawn and true flowers’ nectar,” who would intercede for the community and advance the interests of the indigenous population in particular. Far from him were the demeaning views of incapacity raised by some official documents and other members of the church. Yet, his support was framed within a lack of certitude about the depth of Christianity among the Indian community. In his words, there was a return to the early fears held by Zumárraga and the first bishops of the land. Indians, he believed, were still under the influence of idolatry and superstition, an opinion shared by Oaxaca’s Bishop Ortigosa. Their chosen women, however, could bring about a change in that situation. Indian nuns would “edify” the indigenous community and improve their observance of the Catholic doctrine. “The example of their relatives praising so devotedly the true God, would encourage them to discard their idols, because the example of one’s relatives is very influential.”

Almodóvar also added an important element of belief and religiosity: the nuns and their convent could bring a new Christian apotheosis. Reaching the peaks of enthusiasm, the good friar confessed that he expected that the nuns’ presence could reduce the frequency of earthquakes in Oaxaca. It was well known, he stated, that since the arrival of the Augustinian nuns of the strict observance—the convent of Señor San José—the earthquakes had declined in number. The foundation of another strict convent could be so pleasing to God that the quakes could cease altogether, because the greater the number of intercessors, the greater the gifts of God. Indian nunneries were elevated to a new height as venues of miracles, a special quality ascribed by popular and religious lore to the convent as a chosen conduit for God’s mercy and divine intervention. The virtue of faith embodied in the nuns would create innumerable public benefits. This was yet a new turn in the creation of favorable popular image on behalf of Indian nunneries. He also saw other reasons for the foundation, amenable to public welfare and with definite economic appeal. The foundation of this convent, he said, would be an educational tool for the Indian community, inasmuch as the professants had to learn Spanish and this would spur parents to adopt the language for the education of their daughters. In Almodóvar’s view, Indian nunneries were links to the modernization and enlightenment of their people. On the economic side, the city would profit from an increase in trade triggered by the Indians visiting it to see the convent and favor the nunnery with their charity and support. The astuteness of his economic remarks were unparalleled in his time, when most convents were regarded as economic drains to the community if not the state.

Petitions for two more foundations for Indian nuns in the outskirts of Mexico and in Puebla, respectively, fell through.⁷¹ The last convent for Indian nuns was that of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe of the teaching Order of Mary (La Enseñanza) that began its life in 1811, when colonial life was almost

at its end for New Spain. Strictly speaking, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe was not a new foundation. Its roots were in the school for Indian girls, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, established by the Jesuits and approved by the Crown on May 13, 1759.⁷² This convent would have an adjunct school to teach Indian girls of all social classes and the teachers would be professed Indian nuns.⁷³ The supportive arguments expressed by its influential promoter, the Count of Castañiza, and other religious authorities, on the usefulness of religious teachers revealed old concerns over the lack of Indian education and their want of assimilation to Spanish cultural patterns. What is striking is their confidence in the ability of the nuns to become teachers of their own community. This standing marked the final step in a process that had begun over 250 years earlier. The image of the neophyte was finally displaced by that of the teacher-religious in charge of her own people, and with the full support of Crown and church. The convent fulfilled the original purpose of those who, in the sixteenth century, had seen the need of earning the confidence of Indian parents to send their daughters to a school in the hands of nuns of their own race.⁷⁴

PIETY AND FAITH AS A SCRIPT FOR INDIAN NUNS

Race and spirituality made a strange and potent mixture in the New World. European Christianity confronted a difficult situation when the issue of admitting a new race to the elected body of the brides of Christ was posed in the sixteenth century. It took two centuries for those involved in making a decision to change from hesitation and doubt to an approval that, while not shared by all, was at least a sincere acknowledgment of the natives' capability for living the faith as fully as any true old Christian.

The ability of Indians to endure the preparation required to profess, the mettle of their religiosity and spirituality, as well as the depth of their faith were seen as key obstacles in the acceptance of indigenous women in the body of the church. In the seventeenth century, negative opinions began to shift at the highest levels, although there was much skepticism and resistance from within the church itself. By the late seventeenth century Indian men, albeit in very small numbers, were accepted into the ranks of the secular church. Women were still on trial. Seventeenth-century hagiography helped to strengthen a vision of indigenous piety that served as a transition between the denial of the sixteenth century and the final acceptance of the eighteenth century. In that hagiographic view the protagonists resembled the archetype of the "wise illiterate" that Michel de Certeau saw in some European seventeenth-century religious writings.⁷⁵ The rustic ignorant, who without much learning achieved great learning about God and from God, was embodied in the biography of Salvadora de los Santos and the meek Indians praised by Bishop Palafox and by Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora. This popular form of religious culture focused on marginalized members of society to "humble" high-brow theological knowledge, and to open mental doors to the possibility that they had an immanent capacity to understand God. The development of a hagiography in which women, including Indian women, appear as central characters was a key element in the spirituality of the seventeenth century and in the evolution of the concept of Indian nuns. The central argument in the writings and opinions of those who favored the foundation of Indian nunneries in the eighteenth century was that some indigenous women had the capacity of communicating with God and were selected by him for special revelations. Therefore, they could assume a life of discipline within the church.

When Indian women began to apply as novices in their newly founded convents, the model indigenous nun began to take shape. The requirements to be a nun went beyond education or sincerity in the adoption and practice of Christianity. Profession also called for character, vocation, and self-discipline, qualities that allowed the novices to understand their vocation through many spiritual vicissitudes. Whether or not Indian women had such qualifications was the touchstone for their full acceptance as equal in stature to the white nuns. The notarized testimonies given by secular witnesses when Indian women applied for profession dwell on character and behavior. While most are standard recommendations of virtue and good conduct, some portray the aspirant in a more personal manner. When Petrona Catalina de la Cruz applied to profess in Nuestra Señora de Cosamaloapán in 1742, a white small landowner (*labrador*), testified on her solid virtue, good work habits, and observance of a sheltered life, "perpetual recogimiento." She was never seen in the street, except to attend Mass.⁷⁶ A *castizo* (nearly white) artisan witness also praised her recogimiento and her unswerving attendance to Mass, stating that he considered her an appropriate model for his own daughter, "whose companion she was, in the hope that she would imitate such a beautiful model." A third, white, witness extolled her exemplary life, and how she was loved and respected by the whole town. Finally, a priest spoke of her exercises in penitence, fasts, and other edifying ascetic practices. Incorporated into the praise of these people was the belief that the novice was a paragon of Christian womanhood, as envisaged in the eighteenth century by men who were at the top of the colonial social and racial scale. Note that all witnesses were white. She had to measure up to their standards.

The biographies of the Indian nuns of Corpus Christi are another example of the rationalization and exaltation of the capacity of Indian women for religious life. To the indigenous communities, having these women "reaching the religious state" was an honor attained at the end of a long road, but in order to qualify they had to become a replica of the official model of spiritual perfection.⁷⁷ Mónica Díaz has convincingly argued that the author of the best known compilation of biographies of Indian nuns was possibly a religious man who could have been preparing a publication to support Corpus Christi against its critics. He could have been one of their confessors and, as he wrote, he followed in style and spirit the canons of current hagiography. He endowed the Indian nuns with the virtues extolled in white nuns. Nothing in their behavior made them different from españolas. As such, they had an abundance of charity, obedience, humbleness, docility, deep Christian faith, willingness to endure abstinence and physical discipline, and love of poverty. In fact, no "Indian identity" is detected in the manner in which indigenous nuns observed their Rules and the discipline of monastic life imported from Europe. The one known letter from a professed nun complained that the españolas were not as observant as the Indians.⁷⁸ Mónica Díaz, using a different document, a set of biographies entitled *Apuntes de algunas vidas de nuestras hermanas difuntas* (Notes on the Lives of Some of Our Deceased Sisters) possibly written by an Indian nun living in the convent, shows important differences in the style and content of the narrative, as well as insights that only an Indian woman could have had. However, it also portrays the nuns as devout recipients of divine favors and visions are also at the bottom of the shorter, female-written biographies.⁷⁹

A specific ethnic element had to be inserted in the discourse of piety and spirituality if there was to be any resonance among the Indian communities. It also had to meet the standards of orthodoxy demanded by the church. The model of Christianity that also addressed the Indian identity of the professants was built, ironically, by Jesuit Juan Uvaldo de Anguita, a well-known preacher in the early years of the eighteenth century. He built the model of the convent as a place for the meeting of pre-Hispanic beliefs and Christianity in a sermon written for the occasion of the opening of Nuestra Señora de Cosamaloapán in March 1737.⁸⁰ The sermon was printed six years later, in 1743, when factionalism was rending the inner fabric of the convent, and religious authorities in Mexico awaited royal decision on the acceptance or expulsion of the white nuns from Corpus Christi. The sermon was an undisguised attempt to reconcile sorely divided opinions about the role of Indian nuns in the church and the admission of whites into their communities.

Two church members waxed over Anguita's interpretation while granting their canonical approval for its printing. They belonged to the social and religious hierarchy of Mexico and their support reinforced the cause of those who were struggling to establish the validity of the indigenous convents.

Dr. Luis Fernando de Hoyos y Mier, Canon of the Metropolitan Church in Mexico City, praised Anguita's use of Tarascan history to compare some pre-Columbian beliefs to those of Christ's prophets, as if God had prepared the Indian nation for his true message. The "delightful vocation" of the cacique women was a sign that God's will had been fulfilled. Nuns of their own race could help Indians overcome the alien nature of Christianity and understand their old beliefs as a prescience of the new faith. For his part, the Carmelite Fr. Fernando de Santa María confessed that until he read this sermon he had doubts about the wisdom of imposing strict observance on female Indians and the mixing of Indian and non-Indian, but he was convinced otherwise by Anguita's arguments.⁸¹

Anguita followed a syncretic line established by many preachers in the sixteenth century and strengthened by men who had already explored the way of bridging the gap between indigenous beliefs and Roman Catholicism, such as Fernando Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora. Admitting the validity of the indigenous religion was impossible, but the effort to restore dignity to it as a possible prophetic vision of Christianity was to be pursued by other eighteenth-century Jesuits, such as Francisco Javier Clavigero.⁸² Anguita's sermon gives us the clue to the formula that would permit closing the gap of misunderstanding created by race-consciousness, and reinterpreting the destiny of the female Indian religious as new subjects in the ranks of the church. He expertly presented a canonical vision of the nunnery as a garden of lilies in which the nuns were represented as the golden seeds of Mary's fecund womb after the Tarascan conversion. Gold, the most precious metal, and seeds signifying the multiplication of the members of the faith and the benefits of Christianity were generously used throughout the sermon. When the Tarascan king converted to Christianity, he had established the first link between the New and the Old World and the new and the old Christians. East and West had met, and the most recent fruit of this encounter was the convent in which españolas and Indians met again to strengthen their ties and the Christian faith. He juxtaposed the symbols of the old deities and the Christian ones to prove to his audience that it was possible to build Christian life on the foundations of pagan gods and festivities. For example, Indians offered *taloques* or flowers in the third month of the year, asking for rain for their crops. The convent opened in March, and with "singular providence," it had rained the day of the new brides' consecration. The celebration of *Tonacayohual*, the fertility goddess, permitted him to remember that she also had the service of virgins in a "nunnery" built by Emperor Incoachin. He went further and compared the bread figures of the old rites, the *ubitipilchtzchz*, to the Christian host. The transformation of those rites and beliefs was made a reality in the consecration of the new temple to house the followers of Mary, mother of the consecrated grain, Jesus, where a new crop of virgins would be gathered.

To the eighteenth-century mind the evolution of an idolatrous religion into the "true" religion was part of the new world order and God's own plan. Not only were women part of this plan; they were no longer mere recipients but *true agents* of Christianization, elevating themselves through the emulation of Mary to be the new models for their community. Prejudice was neither buried nor forgotten because of this sermon, but in the debate over whether race was an impediment to female spirituality, perceived gender virtues recast in a different historical frame helped to confer on the Indians agency and protagonism.

The interplay of gender, race, and class within the ambits of the convent throughout the colonial period was an experience that divided people's reactions into two main camps. Those against the concept of indigenous nuns perceived negative racial characteristics more than their ability and readiness as a gender, or the positive qualification they could derive from class (being cacique or principal). For those who had little doubt about these women's ability to observe the discipline of religious life, race was the factor that gave their gender the special capacity to profess, insofar as their upbringing as Indians was expected to be a test in itself. Class reinforced that expectation, and cacique Indians were carefully set apart from other Indians of lesser rank. The final spiritual formula that would incorporate Roman Catholicism into the experience and the memory of these women, to make them models of Christian behavior, proposed that before profession Indians emulate the qualities that made white women eligible for the marriage with God. After their profession indigenous women were expected to assume all the features of the spirituality of their times, in the understanding that it was a desirable evolution, a final crowning experience for themselves and their people. No other choice was desirable or available. Indian nuns would become redemptive links between their idolatrous past and Christianity, women of the highest Christian merit for the most demanding of husbands. This point was best illustrated in the memorial service sermon for the founder of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles, Sor María Teodora de San Agustín. When Joseph Victoriano Baños y Domínguez climbed the pulpit on May 10, 1799, to eulogize her, he was putting closure to two centuries of doubts about indigenous women's religious vocation. Sor María Teodora, who had left Corpus Christi after twenty-seven years of enclosure to head the Oaxacan cloister and live there for another sixteen years, was memorialized as the epitome of observance, poverty, humility, and leadership worth imitating. In this, the first of her "nation" to receive an *elogio fúnebre* or memorial sermon, he shunned exceptionality in the form of ecstasies, visions, or revelations. What this nun had had was an exceptional piety and a solid virtue wrapped in charity and understanding of her community and her sisters.

Baños also delivered a key message that would echo the words of Dominican historian Fr. Alonso Franco and Juan Ignacio de Castorena y Ursúa: the equality of all people in the eyes of God. But while Franco and Castorena y Ursúa were begging for the recognition of the equality imparted by divine grace among Spaniards and Indians, Baños took María Teodora's figure as a venue to illustrate God's inclusion of all peoples under his grace, a theme already hinted at by Fr. Alonso Franco in the previous century. "Asians and Africans, Europeans and Americans, white and black, blondes and brunettes" had similar souls before God, he said, and the best were those with the highest charity, "be it who it may, Spaniard, Indian, mulatto, mestizo or [any] of the other castas."⁸³ After his appeal for equality in a diverse society, he returned to make a final case for the Indians. They possessed a beautiful natural disposition for Christian virtues, and if there was any lack of progress, it was "us," he said, who are to blame. "Us" meant the Spaniards who had failed in instructing them, a shift in the emphasis not often heard among his peers. But, he added, if all Indians could count on a monastery of exemplary women, then they would overcome any problem due to their lack of Christian instruction. Baños was proposing that these chosen women could embody Christianity and be capable of moving the rest of their people. He wished his voice to be strong enough to sing the praises of Sor María Teodora, so that it could be heard from Pole to Pole by all the "natural inhabitants of both Americas" with the message of "Christian virtue and religious behavior of an Indian woman of their same origin and humble sphere."

Castorena y Ursúa, Anguita, and Baños y Domínguez represented a new view of Indian women as nuns that placed them not just on equal footing with the white women, but made them icons of their own race. With the foundation of Indian nunneries, the church—which was in principle hegemonic and intolerant of deviations, androcentric, and patriarchal—was able to solve the challenge of finding a place for the females of the conquered race. The process was laborious and plagued by bitter infighting, but those members of the church who were willing to modify their own standing had the upper hand. By accepting the foundation of Indian nunneries, the Catholic Church ingratiated itself with the indigenous communities, while it maintained its own sense of exclusiveness and elitism by favoring caciques and principals as professants. Socially, the separation of the races prevailed within the cloisters. But, for eighteenth-century elites, equal but separate was a perfectly acceptable formula for social balance, and one that the Indian elites were ready to accept as long as their women had a place of their own, and that it reflected well on their loyalty to Christianity and their own self-esteem and dignity as a race.

CHAPTER NINE

The Struggle over Vida Común

“What we have represented to the Real Audiencia has been in the spirit of truth and straightforwardness, that we did not admit and did not sign *vida común*, and we ask that under the law, we receive the freedom to pursue our legal suit so that we return to the system we found when we professed.”



With these words, spelled out in a document signed in May 1773, the nuns of La Santísima Trinidad, of Puebla, rejected the efforts of their bishop to make them accept a form of observance called *vida común* (life in common) against their own wishes. The document expressed more than unrest and hostility; it was a statement of a will to resist the orders of the men who ruled their lives as administrators and spiritual directors. The nuns of La Santísima Trinidad were not alone. Others in Puebla and Mexico City had also objected to similar designs to change their well-established lifestyle, which they were certain did not offend God or endanger their souls. The result of their concerted efforts to oppose changes in their observance was one decade of open struggle between defying nuns and obstinate prelates, each sticking to their viewpoint and defending their “turf” with cunning and sometimes shameless manipulation of resources.

This was also an instance of blatant gender confrontation, insofar as statements and attitudes on both sides were loaded with stereotyped assumptions about the opposite sex. Prelates assumed that the nuns had to obey them as spiritual fathers, as their religious superiors, and as men. In defying their prelates nuns used the same gendered notions, by resorting to calls on their female weakness, sensitivity, and delicacy, and asking the ultimate father, the king, for protection.¹ There was a strong mixture of political determination on the part of the prelates, of policy definition on the part of the Crown, and of self-defense on the part of the nuns in this encounter.

Several conventual disturbances over the proper manner of observing their religious Rules had taken place in the seventeenth century, but none rivaled in length and intensity as that provoked by the enforcement of *vida común* in the 1770s. The resistance from the religious took their prelates and the royal bureaucracy by surprise. With few notable exceptions, the ecclesiastical hierarchy formed an almost solid front to enforce the changes they regarded as beneficial and desirable to the brides of Christ. For their part, those nuns opposed to the reform developed ties of solidarity that crossed diocesan boundaries and ecclesiastical jurisdictions in their will to resist a situation they found unacceptable. At the same time, however, the reform also created tensions and rifts in the convents, as some communities were split on accepting the *vida común*.

No other incident in the history of female convents generated so much paperwork and so much correspondence between Mexico and Spain. This exchange involved the highest echelons of the royal government from the king down: the viceroy, the Council of the Indies, the Archbishop of Mexico, and the bishops of Puebla, Oaxaca, and Michoacán, as well as the heads of the regular Orders. For one long decade, arguments were raised and contested in private correspondence, ecclesiastic councils, and civil courts. Such attention was not welcomed by nuns. It placed an unbearable strain upon their communities and on their relations with the male hierarchy. This was as much a case of exercise of male power as it was one of gender confrontation, and it is still difficult to determine who “won” on either count, or if anybody won at all.

Plans for an overhaul in the form of observance began to take shape between 1765 and 1770, as bishops began to plan a strategy to recommend and enforce the change. The period of confrontation began in 1770 and lingered through the mid-1780s. Throughout this decade, prelates remained intransigent in their positions, and the rebellious nuns became increasingly combative and developed networks among themselves. Royal decrees and the statement of the Fourth Provincial Council that took place in Mexico City in 1771 acted as leavening, creating more confusion than clarification of the situation. The issue had a languorous demise in the 1780s, as the two forms of observance coexisted side by side with a declining interest among the prelates to enforce the *vida común* among incoming novices. In 1792, the Bishop of Michoacán put an end to the observance of *vida común* in the convent of La Purísima Concepción in San Miguel el Grande.² While we do not know for sure if other bishops took a cue from Michoacán, the fact is that by the end of the century the discussion of the enforcement of *vida común* was a moot point.

A PLAN FOR REFORM

The reform in observance that was proposed in the late 1760s affected only the calced or calzada convents that teemed with servants and seculars. In proposing a change in the observance of the conventual Rules, the main objective of the religious authorities was to bring them closer in observance and internal discipline to the discalced or Capuchin nunneries. Two seventeenth-century reform precedents gave nuns and prelates a base to measure their interests in the 1770s. Franciscan authorities had made some attempts in the mid-seventeenth century to reduce the number of servants and secular girls in their convents, without much success. In the mid-eighteenth century they were still trying to curb the number of religious in some of their most populous convents, such as that of Santa Clara in Querétaro.³ On the other hand, Archbishop Payo de Ribera had decided, between 1672 and 1673, that the best way to remedy the economic problems affecting many convents under his jurisdiction was to allow nuns to administer their own income and provide their own food, rather than have the convent provide for them. He did not disturb the number of servants either. This decision strengthened the personal independence of nuns in terms of managing their own daily lives (*vida particular*), and one century later gave the rebellious nuns grounds to defend their arguments.⁴ The ecclesiastical authorities, contemplating a change in mid-eighteenth century, saw nothing but a long history of abuse that demanded remedy.

In the mid-1760s, a set of circumstances seemed to favor a joint effort of the main heads of the church, secular and regular, to compel nunneries to adhere to the appropriate observance of their Rules. The Bourbon dynasty that ascended to the throne during the war of the Spanish Secession (1700–14) opened a remarkable period of renovation and reformation in the country, which began to affect Spanish lives by the 1740s. The reign of Charles III (1759–88) was marked by an emphasis on the policy of regalism by creating a clear separation of the rights of church and state, and strengthening its *potestas* in some areas thus far controlled by the church.⁵ The Crown respected the spiritual prerogatives of the church and remained a defender of the faith, but insisted that some reforms in the church–state relationship were in the best interests of both.⁶ Charles and his ministers did not consider themselves irreverent, but were adamant about exercising royal authority. The best example of their resolve was the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, a move that would have been unthinkable only several decades before. Within the church an influential group of prelates largely supported the reforms promoted by the Crown, and they claimed that an internal reform would improve the quality of observance and spirituality.

The leaders of the ecclesiastical reform focused on improving the moral quality of the clergy and the quality of observance of religious life within convents. They were also in favor of greater religious austerity and more streamlined devotional practices.⁷ Numerous personal complaints of prelates in America provided strong grounds for an extension of the policy of reformation to the dominions. Given the idiosyncrasies in the observance of Mexican nunneries, it is not surprising that the scheme of reform initiated in the 1760s had staunch supporters, especially since some Spanish prelates were also determined to enforce similar rules in the peninsula.⁸ Most bishops and archbishops in New Spain, as well as the heads of the regular Orders, were Spaniards, and those who became involved in the reform were also “regalists” or advocates of Charles III’s reforms.

The changes proposed for the female convents of New Spain were peculiar in that they did not attempt to introduce something new. The regalist bishops tried to convince the nuns that a return to the practices of earlier periods in Christianity best preserved the purity of religious orthodoxy. Practices that had their roots in the early seventeenth century were deemed as “lax.” Exactly what those rules of “early Christianity” were remained vaguely defined as an unchallenged and unexplained assumption.⁹ The prelates remained adamant in stating that convents allowing nuns to maintain a personal style in daily life lacked austerity and were contravening the vows of profession and the spirit of true Christianity. Their ire was addressed to conventual practices tracing back to the seventeenth century that had remained unreformed for more than one century. Ecclesiastic critics began to point to the large numbers of servants, the constant appeals to the families of nuns for money to be spent on the needs of convents, the loss of conventual funds, and the quarrels among members of communities and their superiors leading to appeals to civil authorities. The nuns’ frequent contacts with the outer world violated their vow of enclosure and endangered that of chastity. In the eyes of the prelates, these numerous shortcomings caused the deterioration of the spiritual character of these institutions and put at risk the hopes for salvation of the brides of Christ. Something had to be done to remedy this situation.

THE REFORM UNFOLDS

The reform in the observance of the feminine Orders in Mexico began in Puebla, where, from 1765 to 1770, Bishop Francisco Fabián y Fuero attempted to restore what he defined as *vida común*. His Pastoral Letter of October 5, 1765, makes reference to a decree by Pope Clement XI (1700–21), who had deemed the reported conditions of nunneries in New Spain detrimental to their virtue.¹⁰ Fabián y Fuero expressed concern over two points: the frequent communications of nuns with seculars outside the cloisters, and the expenses they incurred when they served in their assigned tasks in the convent. At this point, Fabián y Fuero took remedial steps such as prohibiting the purchase of works of art or devotion, and decorative objects, stipulating that convents must regularly report on their regular expenses and on those incurred for the celebration of holy feasts. He recommended abstention from unwarranted personal expenses, and forbade nuns to engage in sewing for profit or other money-raising activities unbecoming to their state.

The following year, 1766, he enacted more prohibitions. Nuns should not sleep in the same room with the girls in their charge, especially when they were sick. He also forbade pets because they could “procreate.” The bishop also reduced the time the sisters should serve in conventual posts from three years to one and a half years, contending that the longer term could harm their health. His true objective was to cut back on the personal expenses incurred by the nuns when they served as officials. Noting the multitude of visitors at the parlors, and the fact that they kept irregular hours, causing the nuns “innumerable worries,” he ordered the parlors to be open for only two hours in the morning and one hour in the afternoon.¹¹ Another drastic order issued by the prelate, in August 1767, was the prohibition of the purchase of cells. As he put it, those souls called to serve God should receive a cell from the convent, which should make them available without charge to incoming novices and nuns.¹² Convents had always assumed they owned the cells, and they sold and resold them to the nuns, benefiting from any improvement their occupants made. They were bound to lose a very important item in their budget if the bishop’s orders were enforced, not to mention the insecurity that nuns felt in not having a place they called “theirs” for the duration of their lives. Fabián y Fuero argued that these measures were not “radical,” but a part of the regular observance they should be following. He professed to be motivated by his love for his spiritual daughters and concern about the fulfillment of their vows.

While these measures were a presage of his plans, he did not announce the adoption of *vida común* until August 10, 1768.¹³ The expulsion of the Jesuits had shaken the Viceroyalty. Nuns had relied for centuries on the services of the Society of Jesus for spiritual guidance, and the diocesan prelates had to address the shock and hardly hidden, anguished anger among them.¹⁴ The core of the proposed reform was fully presented in a Pastoral Letter sent to the five convents under his care, Santa Catalina de Sena, La Concepción, San Jerónimo, Santa Inés de Monte Policiano, and La Santísima Trinidad.¹⁵ As he explained to them the principles of *vida común* to calm the fears already raised by his previous pastoral legislation, he invoked the authority of Saint Augustine, Saint Francis, and the Deeds of the Apostles. *Vida común*, he claimed, was neither a “horrid monster” nor cause for trepidation, but a beautiful and peaceful form of observance, which they should all adopt because their superiors willed it and were prepared to facilitate its adoption. From its inception, Fabián y Fuero assumed that women in the convents should obey their male prelates as a matter of canon.

Between August and early September 1768, the bishop proceeded to lay out a meticulously designed master plan aimed at reforming three key aspects of daily observance: the number of servants, the provision of food, and the health care of the nuns.¹⁶ These aspects of the reform had apparently nothing to do with spirituality, but the bishop argued that the reorganization of daily life and the degree of comfort and discipline the nuns would enjoy after the reform would help them focus more sharply on the higher goals of their spiritual life. No detail escaped his attention. His design had a clear architectural and functional view and implied remodeling the conventual spaces. All spaces in the convent’s building were dedicated to sharing the common objective of a more saintly life by encouraging the communal performance of their daily duties. The function of each conventual space would be newly adapted to living in a community in which religious observance would become more austere and also more cost-efficient.

The common offices (*oficinas*) should be the infirmary, the kitchen, and the provisory of goods and wardrobe. They would furnish goods and services to all nuns. These three areas should be built as closely as possible to each other, the better to serve their purposes, and should be ample to

accommodate all personnel necessary to run them. The infirmary should communicate with the dormitories. The kitchens should be next to the refectory or dining hall. It should have running water and appropriate means to dispose of grey waters, and it should have open niches (possibly for storage) and adequate cooking facilities. He even thought of the ceilings. All new construction should have, if possible, vaulted ceilings, especially the kitchen, to facilitate ventilation. Since his plans called for architectural changes, some private cells would have to be appropriated to make way for the new communal spaces. The dispossessed nuns would share accommodation with those still occupying private cells. Thus, it was understood that some nuns would retain their private cells, but they could no longer claim sole occupancy.

Fabián y Fuero's plan addressed all practical matters in running the convent, to ensure that the spirit of poverty should prevail in every detail.¹⁷ To achieve this end, the nuns in charge of the provisions should be among the most devout, so that they would exercise the spirit of charity and understanding in the allocation of goods. Convents should buy their supplies wholesale to save money, and purchase Spanish merchandise from a purveyor in Veracruz. All convents should have an ample provision of the cloth used for the nuns' habits, and each nun would have a chest of her own for her clothes. A number of maids should be allocated for washing and mending the nuns' clothes separately. Cleanliness and personal attention would prevent the spread of diseases. He allowed four sets of clothes for each nun, and allocated one maid per ten nuns, intending to reduce the large number of servants in the convents.

Communication with the outside world through the parlor was to be altered. Fabián y Fuero provided that a second *torno* would be opened to serve exclusively the traffic of goods required by the convent, as well as for the visits and conversations with the nuns' relatives. The main parlor would then serve the administrative needs of confessors, administrators, and physicians. He was conscious that there had to be daily purchases, such as charcoal and bread, which required a constant flow of petty cash and transactions with the outside world; but as long as there were rules to control such activities, he had no objection to them. Nuns acting as purveyors would provide a weekly account of purchases. Adjustments to these rules were given in November and December 1769.

Nuns would not be subjected to a Spartan way of life, claimed Fabián y Fuero. Special religious celebrations, small gifts to the benefactors of the community, and refreshments for visitors would still be allowed. He did not forbid offering chocolate to religious guests, special food to the sick, or sweets for special occasions such as Christmas, but everything should be in moderation, as befit the poverty of the brides of Christ. However, one important sacrifice they should be willing to accept was the limitation in the number of servants. Taking a clue from the convents practicing a discaled way of life, he suggested that with twelve maids assigned for the kitchen, the wardrobe, and the infirmary, convents would be amply and well-served. He also allocated at least two servants for other areas of the convent where their services were required. The maximum number of servants allowed in each convent would be sixty. It was understood that cutting down the number of maids necessitated the discharge of the rest. Since cleaning dormitories and cells was also the task of the conventual maids, the conclusion was that they would be working continuously throughout the day, as they were expected to serve wherever they would be most needed. The prospect was as frightening for the maids as it was for the nuns.

One point that gave much discomfort to nuns and the laity was the order to remove *niñas* from the convents. They were a variety of women, ranging from a tender age to truly old women, who had spent their entire lives in the cloisters as protégées of the nuns. In December 1769, Fabián y Fuero acknowledged that his first intention had been to relieve the convents from the burden of *niñas*. They were as many in numbers as the nuns, and took a great deal of the community's time, especially at meals. While he confessed that, at first, he had thought that the *niñas* could help in the practice of *vida común*, experience indicated that it would be better to remove them to several common cells where they would live under the direction of a religious, appointed as "rector" in a "common life" fashion, dressing decorously in a uniform he designed. *Niñas* would be allocated to perform different tasks in the convent, and for the sake of charity they would pay nothing to the convent.¹⁸ But by January 29, 1770, the bishop had changed his mind and determined that their presence was incompatible with *vida común*, even under the terms he had designed.¹⁹ He came to the conclusion that nothing could disturb a true religious life more than the emotional hold the nuns developed on the girls they were raising. Thus, they should be completely removed from the cloisters.²⁰

In less than one year, a tight set of rules to ensure a complete modification of observance was in place. *Vida común* was indeed a proposal to change daily life as nuns had known it up to that time, replacing it with a copy of the reforms introduced by Saint Teresa to her Carmelite convents in the sixteenth century. Such Rules were extolled as the true observance of "ancient times." Fabián y Fuero's prescription was the most comprehensive plan for reform of nunneries in the entire colonial period. Pastoral care was a serious task for the clergy, whether its recipients agreed or disagreed over the content of religious legislation, and Fabián y Fuero, as the architect of this reform, regarded himself as a good keeper of his flock, even though his attention created a storm of discontent.

What was the spiritual objective of *vida común*? So much emphasis was placed on the restrictions applicable to daily life that the spiritual benefits presumably accrued from such sacrifices looked, if not insignificant, at least limited. They were discussed as a matter of principle by the prelates, but nuns did not believe that disobeying *vida común* would, in any way, harm their spiritual life. The return to a simpler way of life believed to be that observed by early Christian communities seemed to be out of place and anachronistic in the eighteenth century. The bishop's explanation of the spiritual ends was circular and emanating more from authority than from a well-argued need. As he put it, God willed the change, and he was a mere enforcer of his desire. Nuns were reminded that they had surrendered their will to the type of life ordered by their spouse, Jesus Christ, and that although the change of life would be uncomfortable, it was a "spiritual war to end a bad peace."²¹ But, as time would show, his war to reduce the nuns to a so-called "primitive observance" would not bring the desired "good" peace to his flock. Regardless of what they thought about the proposed modifications to daily observance, nuns acknowledged receipt in August 1768. The abbesses of all diocesan convents in Puebla sent obsequious official letters of submission to the bishop signed by all the members of their communities agreeing to follow the common life.²²

The apparent calm of that summer in Puebla had been preceded by an even quieter and secretive first call to change (to *vida común*) in Mexico City, where Archbishop Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, made his move on May 19, 1768.²³ On that date he wrote a letter to the abbess of the convent of La Concepción, the oldest in New Spain and the mother house of the Conceptionist Order. This prestigious convent was expected to lead the others in accepting the reform. He requested La Concepción's nuns to deliberate on the reform in secret and advise him on the results of a communal vote. He also hoped La Concepción would anticipate his edict and *request it* before he published his decree. Lorenzana warned the nuns that if they did not agree to his petition they should remain silent until they received a "stronger and inexcusable" ruling from him. The archbishop wanted a guaranteed success, and from the outset was unwilling to accept a negative answer.

The nuns in the capital must have been appalled at the archbishop's proposal, and they did not keep the secret. They sought solidarity and advice from their sisters in other convents. A letter dated May 30, 1768, from Francisca Teresa de San Miguel, Abbess of La Encarnación, to Catarina de San

Francisco, Abbess of La Concepción, asked her for guidance in her decision. She was unsure of the response of her own community, but begged Sor Catarina to let her know whether her community was prepared to accept or to resist the archbishop's request.²⁴ Obviously, Lorenzana had written to all nunneries expecting that they would not communicate with each other. For the first time, we hear the voice of the nuns and we learn that the conventual grapevine was activated for mutual support as they felt themselves under attack. Much later into the reform, in November 1771, the convents of San Lorenzo and San Bernardo sent letters to the Abbess of Jesús María offering moral and material support to maintain the cause against *vida común*.²⁵

After having "tested" the expected cooperation of the nuns, Archbishop Lorenzana issued a Pastoral Letter proposing the common life on December 6, 1769.²⁶ He must have been aware of Bishop Fabián y Fuero's letter to Viceroy Marquis of Croix, on November 26, 1769, announcing that all his convents in Puebla had accepted *vida común* and that the new observance would be in place one week later, on the first Sunday before Advent.²⁷ Archbishop Lorenzana followed Fabián y Fuero, seemingly allowing the bishop to lead the reform movement.

Lorenzana gilded his message with the pledge that he did not want to reduce nuns to "the rigors of the first centuries of the church," but to reform the abuses inflicted on the vow of poverty. He claimed to have suffered, as had all of his predecessors, the sight of disorder in the use of convents' private income, the purchase and sale of cells, and the large number of servants and seculars. The latter caused him the greatest discomfort. In a convent of one hundred nuns, he said there were often over two hundred servants who introduced their vanities, gossips, and bad customs in the cloister. Servants were especially obnoxious in the Americas, where castas (mixed-bloods) abounded and eroded the moral integrity of the religious state. He told the nuns how secular and regular prelates were constantly bombarded by requests for permissions to approve the constant traffic of servants in and out of the convents. The girls of distinction who were accepted in the convents for their education received all sorts of bad examples living in such an environment. His professed distaste of the racial mixtures in New Spain colored his view of the need to separate the flowers of Christendom from the mud of the rabble. *Vida común* would end all offensive practices and establish peace and charity among all. His pastoral message was irrefutable. He would not admit any interpretation.²⁸ The hierarchical principle that placed nuns at the mercy of their superiors was invoked without the batting of an eye.

Other bishops followed suit. The Bishop of Oaxaca, Miguel Anselmo Alvarez, gave his support to the reform in his Pastoral Letter of February 8, 1770.²⁹ Since 1769 the Franciscan Provincial, Fr. Pablo Antonio Pérez, had been recommending that his nuns adopt *vida común*. After his death in 1770, the Vicar Provincial Fr. Manuel Nájera took the matter into his own hands. On December 5, 1770, he ordered the expulsion of all niñas (young and old) residing in Franciscan convents. His successor, Fr. Francisco García Figueroa, gave orders for better grilles to be installed in the parlors, for windows facing the streets to be raised, and for interior doors to be safely locked.³⁰ It was later claimed that such measures were not aimed at establishing the common life but at reestablishing conventual discipline.³¹

It was not difficult for Bishop Fabián y Fuero to obtain royal approval for his reform, which he solicited in late 1769. In December his labor was praised by the Viceroy Marquis of Croix, and on February 15, 1770, the king also praised the bishop's initiative and ordered that no change be made in the new scheme.³² However, not all was well in New Spain, despite royal orders and the self-satisfaction shown by the bishop in his communications with the viceroy and the king. The viceroy was particularly interested in the compliance of the convent of La Concepción in Mexico City, which was recalcitrant in accepting *vida común*. Croix wrote twice to the abbess during 1770, urging her to give an example to her community and the rest of the convents of Mexico by adopting *vida común*. He cited the example of the convent of Balvanera, that had already accepted it, and Franciscan Santa Inés, where the architectural changes were already taking place. He urged her to end opposition to *vida común* and to begin plans for building the new common rooms in compliance with "superior orders."³³ The language in this and subsequent correspondence between resisting nuns and zealous civil and religious officials conveyed undisguised and menacing tones. There was no persuasion or enticement and, as time passed, a war of words and deeds would develop.

REACTION TO VIDA COMÚN AND THE FOURTH PROVINCIAL COUNCIL

La Concepción of Mexico City was not alone in its reluctance to accept *vida común*. A large number of the nondiscalced nuns of New Spain rejected outright the establishment of the common life, mostly on grounds that they did not wish to change their lifestyle. Though the most active protests came from Puebla, resistance in Mexico City and Oaxaca was also considerable. If bishops and the archbishop expected submission and acceptance to their proposal, they were wrong. Nuns chose passive resistance in their personal dealings with their prelates while filing legal briefs before several courts. Obedience to their superiors was a much respected principle, but religious persons had the freedom to judge when obedience could or would hurt their consciences and their chances for salvation. Legally, they were covered by a well-known concept granted to the king's subjects: the *recurso de fuerza*, a petition elevated to the Audiencia to demand protection from being compelled to do something against their will by their prelates. Nuns had used it in the seventeenth century and were prepared to use it again.³⁴

Vida común was first fought on the legal grounds by Jesús María of Mexico City, a convent with resources to pay for its defense and a determination to preserve a lifestyle that had little affinity with the proposed *vida común*.³⁵ This convent had been under royal patronage since its foundation and it was appropriate that it appealed directly to the king. Early in 1770, Jesús María contacted the Crown, and on December 22 the Council of the Indies and the king agreed that the convent could submit its arguments to the Fourth Provincial Council, scheduled to meet in the city in 1771 to study the condition of the church in New Spain.³⁶ Two legal suits, those of Jesús María and La Concepción, were presented to the Fourth Provincial Council. Similarly, Santa Inés, in Puebla, recurred to the king and the Council of the Indies in 1771.³⁷ The appeal of Santa Clara, in Puebla, although dated in 1772, reached the Council of the Indies in 1774.³⁸

The Fourth Provincial Council

In January 1770, the Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco Antonio Lorenzana y Buitrón, called for the Fourth Provincial Council to take place in Mexico City. It was to examine the reported "excesses," to improve the behavior of regulars in the missions, and to create seminaries for the instruction of future clergy.³⁹ Each bishop and archbishop was requested to report fully upon the state of his diocese. With regard to nunneries, the information required of them included statements on the observance of their Rules and the vow of enclosure, on the administration of convent incomes, and on the appointment of confessors. The Council responded to concerns emanating from Spain. Under Charles III, the assumption was that ecclesiastical discipline in the colonies needed a thorough revamping. Not a single gathering of church authorities had taken place in New Spain since the Third Provincial Council, celebrated in 1585. By 1770 it was high time for self-examination and reform.

The Fourth Provincial Council opened its sessions on January 13, 1771, but there were no discussions with regard to the establishment of the common life in nunneries until February, and from the outset all the ecclesiastical authorities showed themselves in favor of adopting it, and proceeded to the consideration of the best ways of undertaking and fulfilling the project.⁴⁰ The Bishop of Puebla was of the opinion that some servants should be allowed to stay in the convents to help the lay sisters. The Bishop of Oaxaca was opposed to the banning of private cells in those convents that were under royal patronage. The Bishops of Yucatán and Durango, though supporting in principle the establishment of the common life, suggested much discretion, meditation, and consultation upon the ways of imposing it. This point of view was favored by the royal representative to the Council, Antonio Rivadeneira. He was of the opinion that it would also be necessary to make a prior study of the Rules and income of all convents in order to determine which points of the reform might be most conveniently applied, since many convents could be ruined by the reform if improperly administrated. He thought the best solution was to establish the common life only for the incoming novices. Thus, over a number of years each community would gradually proceed toward the common life. This was a sensitive and noncontestatory form of adopting *vida común*. Since some of the reports about the adoption or refusal of *vida común* sent by nuns and prelates were contradictory, Rivadeneira asked for a postponement of any decision to permit further study of the nuns' petitions, but he was overruled. Archbishop Lorenzana, especially, was strongly opposed to any of Rivadeneira's suggestions.

The prelates participating in the Fourth Provincial Council were set upon pursuing adoption of the reform, and the Crown's representative, less emotionally involved in this cause, was the sole speaker for moderation, as well as a defender of the king's right to take a final decision on any changes. Obviously, the most "regalist" among the prelates were unwilling to let the matter of reform slip through their fingers and be postponed by a lengthy discussion in the peninsula. They had already taken steps to initiate the reform and could not accept any delays in its execution. Almost at the end of the meetings, in the first days of October, the documents of La Concepción and Jesús María were read again, and although the latter had a sympathetic reception among the prelates, no action was taken. Also toward the end of that month statements sent by San Jerónimo, La Encarnación, San José de Gracia, and San Bernardo in Mexico City, were presented to the Council, but since it was meant to finish on October 26, they were not discussed.

The following ecclesiastical canons were approved by the Council: (1) prohibition of the construction of cells for the private use of the nuns by any of their relatives or patrons; (2) removal of seculars and girls from convents; (3) substitution of servants by lay sisters; (4) prohibition of the reelection of abbesses; and (5) abandonment of singing in the rituals. By royal order, after the closure of the Council, all documents of complaint presented by the nunneries were to pass to the Bishop of Puebla for study.⁴¹ Unfortunately for the convents, their legal arguments could not have landed in less sympathetic hands than those of Fabián y Fuero.

The Arguments of The Sisters

Although their legal files did not win their case for the convents in the Fourth Provincial Council, the arguments wielded by the nuns were forceful and deeply felt, and merit a close review. Their central position was that nothing in the Rules and Constitutions of their Orders forbade their style of life, which had been examined and approved or corrected by previous prelates throughout time. They had not professed as disclaled or Capuchin nuns, and saw no reason to adopt that form of observance. This basic point was developed in various ways that reflected their commitment to uphold the behavior they felt defined them as nuns and communities.

The most polished of the legal cases was the *Manifiesto* of the nuns of Jesús María, penned by lawyer Baltasar Ladrón de Guevara, a distinguished member of the Audiencia. It intended to prove that the convent should be exempt from following the *vida común* because it followed its own Rule as laid down by Archbishop Fr. Payo de Ribera in 1672.⁴² He had corroborated that the communal administration, including a communal kitchen, was ineffective, and that it strained the convent's finances and put the nuns' welfare at risk. Fr. Payo's administrative regulations had been confirmed by Archbishop Juan Ortega y Montañés (1701–08). Self-administration of food and clothes had proved to be more successful than the system of sharing expenses in the common life, and the sisters feared that the introduction of *vida común* would increase the expenses of the convent, a situation they could not afford. To prove its point, Jesús María used the example of the disclaled Capuchins of Mexico City. There, twenty-one nuns operated with a budget of 6,000 pesos annually for their upkeep. Jesús María had eighty-six nuns who, using the same rate of expenses, would need 49,140 pesos to live on. As it was, in the 1770s the convent had a net income of 35,000 to 36,000 pesos. This budget did not include the expenses that would be incurred by the construction of the common rooms demanded by the adoption of *vida común*. Ladrón de Guevara also added that a self-sufficient and well-to-do convent provided well-known benefits to the city as an employer of artisans and artists, as well as a lender in the credit market. He could have also stated that each convent was a substantial purchaser of goods, considering all the commodities needed by the hundreds of women cloistered within.

Gender and class issues were also raised by the nuns and their representatives. While it was easier for men to stand a more rigorous communal discipline, the nuns of Jesús María came from distinguished families accustomed to many comforts. In selecting a convent in which to profess, they did not expect to adopt a lower lifestyle. An additional weighty argument was the potentially adverse effects of *vida común* on the nuns' health. Disclaled and Capuchin nuns were often sick as a result of their Spartan regimen of life. When sick, they needed and received special food, thus undermining the assumption that eating from "one common pot" was a good thing. In Jesús María, they ate from *one kitchen*, but not from a common pot. With regard to the education of girls, Jesús María argued it had received that privilege by royal appointment at the foundation of the convent almost two centuries earlier. The paucity of educational centers in Mexico City made the teaching and sheltering of girls an important and desirable social service. Turning to the subject of servants, the nuns argued that they needed help with the heavy work of the convent. They believed Christ and the apostles had servants to fix their meals! Further, the social customs of the land made the servants a need, not a luxury. Previous prelates had restricted their number, but had never forbidden them. To crown all arguments, Jesús María argued that, being a royal foundation, *only the King* could decide on their case. This last remark was a slap to the archbishop's claim that he could establish any change in their observance without first consulting the Crown.

La Concepción also recalled its history to make its case,⁴³ how the nuns had experienced financial troubles in the seventeenth century, and how the changes introduced by Archbishop Payo de Ribera were efficacious in alleviating them. Despite his provisions, the convent did not improve financially until Archbishop Ortega y Montañés rescinded the obligation of providing meals to all nuns, and instead allowed them a personal sum of money to spend on their own food. This solution had proved successful in allowing the convent to take control of its budget. With regard to servants, cells, and the presence of girls in the convent, the nuns offered arguments similar to those of Jesús María. The adoption of the common life would cost the convent 30,000 pesos in expenses for construction and remodeling. Diverting that money to such ends would mean taking it from investments that provided a secure income to the community. Their financial condition could be easily upset by any change. As a final justification, they cited the Rules established in the seventeenth century by Bishop Palafox for the government of nunneries in New Spain, which they claimed to follow and which were completely incompatible with some of the premises of the common life.⁴⁴

The statement of the nuns of Santa Clara of Puebla had forty-two points in defense of their traditional manner of life.⁴⁵ Despite having rejected *vida común* after the exhortations of their Father Provincial, he proceeded to give orders to make architectural changes in the convent, such as raising the height of the windows, closing some of their reception grilles, and curtailing the hours allowed for visitation. Raising the windows to two meters (over 6 feet) hardly allowed either light or air to enter. These changes, they feared, would make the convent uncomfortable in the summer and more prone to cause sickness. These remarks were not a rhetorical issue. The configuration of the space in a cloister was important for those within. The physical tampering with the buildings ordered by the Franciscan prelate suggests a desire to enhance *recogimiento* to the extreme, forcing the nuns inward and isolating them more efficiently from the outside world. Light and air were elements the sisters needed for their emotional well-being and they were not willing to forego them. Light and the transparency of the air in New Spain were legendary and the convents wished a share of it.

Santa Clara, like La Encarnación, was also concerned about the effects of supplying food and clothing to all nuns from a general conventual income. The Franciscan convents had been under financial stress since the seventeenth century, despite several attempts to correct that situation. In 1710, the Father Provincial had exempted them from eating out of a common pot. Further readjustments of their budget, forced by more loss of income, had resulted in a system whereby each nun received a personal sum of money for bread, meat, and clothes that barely satisfied her needs. The convent was owed large amounts of money, had a debt of 30,000 pesos, and could not balance its budget, being always short of funds. Servants, they argued, were allowed by the Council of Trent, by a 1636 ruling of Pope Paul III, and by their own former Provincials. Santa Clara was also interested in educating girls, albeit informally, in its cloister. It was a long tradition allowed by Franciscan authorities. For lack of such education, given the fact that the Provincial had recently expelled *niñas* from the cloister, many girls were already suffering the terrible fruits of poverty and lack of moral guidance.

The most important point made by this document was to establish the moral grounds for resisting their prelate's orders. While the professed were obliged to obey the prelate, he could not use *imperium* in his order, that is, to compel them to obey against their own free will. He was not entitled to alter "the quiet state of the spiritual marriage that the nuns enjoyed." Putting the marriage to Christ at risk was unacceptable. This was one of the most striking arguments used by nuns throughout this period of unrest. It was unimpeachable in its logic and full of profound meaning, for it pointed to a very subtle understanding of the intimacy that bound the nuns to Christ, their spiritual husband, which was beyond and above the temporal powers of any prelate. Retreating to their special relationship with Christ, the nuns fell back on the impregnable inner sanctum of their lives.

Other important concepts were also expressed in this document. Using the definition of spiritual benefits of the religious life, it touched on a rarely trodden canonical field. It argued that among the nuns' key spiritual benefits were their honor and reputation.⁴⁶ While they had in their humility renounced admission to any privilege (*dignidad*) in order to humble themselves, they could not admit "injury to their good name, because it is divine precept to care and defend honor and good name (*honra y buena fama*), which [to them] were more valuable than all the riches of this world." Thrown in the middle of this discourse, this pithy statement emphasized what was a major motivation behind this and other legal suits: the honor that bound them as a community. One can surmise that the integrity of their behavior; the exemplar role model they hoped to convey to the lay community; and the strict adherence to their Rules were matters of public domain and, as such, part of their public image. These communities did not wish to be thought of as "relaxed," as suggested by innuendos that had begun to spread in Puebla and Mexico City and that many prelates had used in the past in reference to their manner of observance. This pride in the religious state is not often mentioned by name in any document, but it was deeply rooted in the teachings of the novitiate, fixed by the readings, prayers, and sermons, and nourished by their daily dealings with members of the laity and their own prelates. In response, the Franciscan Order answered the suit of its nuns with a countersuit in which it alleged that if the abuses of observance had been unknown to previous prelates, the wish to perpetuate them was inadmissible.⁴⁷ The ground was set for a long-term conflict.

The Confrontation

The issue of *vida común* produced a great turmoil in the convents and little progress toward a mutual understanding between nuns and their prelates. Between 1771 and 1773, a wave of accusations, charges, and countercharges led to splits in the communities and involved some rather unbelievable acts of coercion. A new viceroy, Antonio María de Bucareli, arrived in Mexico in 1771. He remained at the helm of viceregal affairs until his death in 1779, and in general, he favored the reform of the nunneries, but exercised caution in its application until confirmation by the king.

In Puebla, Francisco Fabián y Fuero was helped by a stern secretary and vicar general (later bishop), Victoriano López, whose forceful stand on behalf of *vida común* and interventions in the nunneries caused much grief to the nuns, as well as administrative and spiritual problems for the bishop.⁴⁸

In a report sent to the Crown dated June 5, 1771, a group of forty nuns from Santa Inés argued they had been compelled to accept the reform, and while practicing it, they felt they lacked the peace that had attracted them to religion. They were especially grieved by the amount of labor imposed on them by *vida común*. They compared it to that of a sweatshop (*obraje*) where they were treated like "obraje blacks" (*negras de obraje*), a comparison also used by the nuns of La Santísima. They had little time to rest and pray and limited assistance from the available servants. The sick nuns were ill-attended. Bitterly, they reiterated that this was not the way of life that had attracted them to the convent and under which they had professed. They also disclosed that they had little access to people outside the convent. The abbess gave them no opportunity to contact a lawyer.⁴⁹ The nuns were so passionate about their cause that, in 1772, they had asked the viceroy to suspend the bishop from his position.⁵⁰ The convent remained in a confused internal situation for several years, with the bishop appointing eight confessors who followed his mandate and attempted to persuade the nuns to accept the *vida común*.⁵¹

The report from Santa Inés was the base for a request by the royal representative to the Fourth Provincial Council, Antonio de Rivadeneira, for further study of the process, noting that the Crown had granted the convents of Jesús María and La Concepción a temporary exemption from following the reform. His suggestions fell on deaf ears. In 1772 the nuns remained bitterly divided, and those opposing *vida común* were afraid of reprisals.⁵² Rebellious nuns developed an underground network of communications among themselves, and the situation was further complicated by open alliances between the prelates and those nuns who opted to follow *vida común*. Those objecting to *vida común* had to resort to secrecy in communications among themselves because, being denied open contact with anyone outside the cloisters, they did not want to be identified and further penalized. The letters they succeeded in passing to friends told about being under surveillance by the pro-*vida común* abbess, who was also accused of lying about conventual affairs.⁵³

On February 11, 1772, there was an outbreak in the convent of Santa Inés. Two nuns had joined those who accepted communal life, angering those against it. Two of the latter stood in the parlor of the convent screaming loudly that they wanted to leave the cloisters. The rest of this group joined them and took the unusual step of opening the doors of the convent in a vehement expression of their discontent. Two of their servants climbed the tower of the church of the convent and began ringing the bells, attracting the attention of the entire city. Vicar General Victoriano López and the governor of the

province were summoned to the convent. The latter succeeded in pacifying the nuns by promising them that he personally would look into their case.⁵⁴

The nuns of Santa Inés paid dearly for their protest. On the night of February 19, 1772, the vicar entered the convent “with over 100 men” who after taking over the convent forced the nuns who declared against *vida común* into an area physically isolated from the rest. In the process three nuns were physically mistreated. Some claimed they had received a slap in the face, a blow to the chest, and a stretching of an arm. Those “jailed” in the convent were put on a diet of bread and water as punishment. The Governor of Puebla dined in the bishopric on the following night, a sure sign, said the nuns, that the two were in complicity. As of April 13, 1773, the date of the letter, they remained isolated. They begged to be allowed to return to their old way of life.

By June 1773, the king was aware that the Audiencia of Mexico had received complaints against *vida común* from the nuns of La Santísima Trinidad of Puebla, as well as from San Jerónimo of that same city.⁵⁵ A 1773 statement from twelve nuns of La Santísima Trinidad to Viceroy Bucareli told him about the ill treatment they had been receiving as a result of the bishop’s enforcement of *vida común*. They claimed they were treated “like obraje blacks,” possibly copying the wording of the nuns of Santa Inés.⁵⁶ They also alleged they had signed a statement accepting *vida común* under duress and had been forced to accept an unwanted abbess imposed by Vicar General López. In his only visit to the convent, Bishop Fabián y Fuero gave orders to build the offices required by the change in observance, and for eight months, over eighty men worked in the convent building. According to these twelve nuns, all the convents in town had written to Viceroy Croix asking for lawyers to defend them, although the convent of Santa Inés had been the only one to present a formal complaint before the Fourth Provincial Council.

Altogether, the Council of the Indies and the Crown received statements of dissent from La Concepción, La Encarnación, Jesús María, San Jerónimo, San Lorenzo, San José de Gracia, Regina Coeli and San Bernardo in Mexico City, and Santa Clara, La Concepción, and Santa Catarina in Puebla.⁵⁷ Shortly after the “mutiny” of some of the nuns in Santa Inés, the Audiencia reviewed their case. The attorney in charge was very concerned over the division of the community, the “scandalous” behavior of the nuns (which he felt might set a bad example for other convents), and over the split in the convent, with two communities living side by side. He advised authentication of the report on Santa Inés, and that the nuns be given a defender as they requested.

The review of the Santa Inés case by the Audiencia was a landmark decision in this process and brought a halt to the *vida común* roller coaster. When he delivered his opinion on June 3, 1773, attorney Antonio Areche took the nuns’ arguments seriously and sought to apply the equity that they deserved as the king’s vassals, a smart legal move appealing to ancient tradition as well contemporary notions of royal authority. Nuns were not to be considered reclusive wards of the church, but targets of oppression and violence. In his opinion, the natural defense of a vassal should never be impaired. He concluded that the situation was critical because the sex and state of the plaintiffs, as well as their enclosure, rendered them defenseless. His was a true regalist position that reflected accurately the position of the Crown. The defense of the king’s subjects was above the privileges of the church over its own subjects. Even though it was plainly evident that not all nuns were against *vida común*, the Audiencia’s duty was to stop any oppression of the king’s vassals. Areche followed this thesis with yet another impressive argument to request a reprieve of the *vida común* until the king issued his final decision. He argued that “the peace and tranquility of all religious was not their sole interest, but also a matter affecting the common good of the city of Puebla.”⁵⁸ This was one of the finest moments in the defense of regalism in Mexico. The attorney had not swallowed the bishop’s and vicar’s arguments that they had their hearts open to the requests of all the nuns of their diocese. The Audiencia stood alone in its position. The ecclesiastical authorities had a powerful ally in the person of Viceroy Bucareli, who favored the reform. He was of the opinion that the bishop’s work should not be obstructed. Accordingly, he visited the Audiencia to lobby personally against any decision that would impede the course of reformation. He also wrote to the bishop regretting the incident, which he attributed to the feminine temperament of the nuns, and advised him to lead them with sweetness and give them a hearing.⁵⁹

The Franciscan Order was also having a tough time enforcing the reform in its convents. When Provincial Francisco García de Figueroa carried out a visit to the convents under his jurisdiction in Mexico City in August and September 1774, he found out that in San Juan de la Penitencia, forty-two nuns refused *vida común* and only its two novices accepted it. In Santa Isabel, all fifty-one nuns rejected it.⁶⁰ In Querétaro, none of the ninety-seven nuns in Santa Clara wanted to adopt *vida común*.⁶¹ Fr. Francisco’s opinion of the nuns showed lack of empathy for their arguments. He declared them to be “impertinent and alien . . . irreligious, impious and worthy of dismissal by any Court of Justice.”⁶² His position explains the nature of the breach between pastor and flock and the tensions created by the prelates’ dismissal of any contrary opinion.

From the outset the Crown’s attitude had been cautious. While approving the reform and encouraging the prelates to sustain it, the king did not wish to enforce it against the wishes of the nuns. The contradictory nature of the information reaching him had to be addressed, and he opted for abstaining from any rash action. His “paternal” attitude contrasts strongly with that of the prelates, whose imperious demands had produced chaos in the cloisters. Bishop Fabián y Fuero left Puebla in April 1773, and Victoriano López was appointed as his successor by a royal cédula issued in August of the same year.⁶³ His staunch stand against any tampering with *vida común* would make him a formidable enemy for the nuns and a strong opponent of any intrusion in the process. Thus, he saw with apprehension a visit to Puebla by Mexico’s Archbishop Alonso Núñez de Haro (1771–1800), which had been ordered by the king by a dispatch in June 1773. López feared that such a visit might increase the restlessness in the nunneries, and requested that it be suspended. Viceroy Bucareli discussed this with the Audiencia’s attorney, who was of the opinion that the suspension of the visit could well provoke even more unrest.⁶⁴

As expected, the archbishop’s visit led to considerable friction, mainly because López proved to be intransigent concerning the extent of his prerogatives. Núñez de Haro, assessing the bishop’s open opposition to any intervention in the city, advised Bucareli that if his actions were not restricted many undesirable consequences were likely to follow. The archbishop acknowledged the duress under which the nuns had accepted the common life, and requested the Audiencia and the viceroy to oblige the bishop to respect his orders as the highest ecclesiastical authority in the land. Bucareli and the Audiencia ordered the civil governor of Puebla to aid the archbishop.⁶⁵ Núñez de Haro recommended that the nunneries of Puebla be restored to their previous way of observance, though he advised the nuns to follow their Rules with moderation and modesty. Also, since the confessors of the nuns seemed to have been pressing them unduly to accept the common life, he recommended that they be replaced by impartial ones. While these recommendations were provisional until the king gave his decision in the case, they corroborated the complaints of the dissenting nuns. Already some prelates were having second thoughts about the reform.

The final decision over *vida común* was given in a cédula issued on May 22, 1774. The king decreed that all convents in New Spain should follow the common life. Nevertheless, this measure was not to be injudiciously enforced upon the nuns. He expressed his will to grant individual nuns full

liberty to accept or reject it. Those who would not accept it could remain in the way of life observed when they professed. After publication of the *cédula*, all novices would be required to make a public and legal acknowledgment binding them to communal life. This would ensure its eventual adoption in the future. With regard to servants, a number of them should be allowed to serve those of *vida común*. Sisters following the traditional private management of their own lives (*vida particular*) would be allowed one servant each. Minor girls were definitely banned from the cloisters, except for convents founded for their education.⁶⁶ By respecting the will of the nuns to remain in the old form of observance the Crown recognized their right to adhere to their tradition. The reform, as approved by Charles III, was essentially broadminded while still recommending the common life as a better mode of observance for spiritual life. By leaving the nuns in complete liberty to make their own choice, the king thought that all sources of protest would be eliminated. The nuns were given fifteen days after the *cédula* was received in New Spain to make their decision. The prelates would then carry out an enquiry in their convents in order to admit into the new system those who voluntarily decided to join it.

The *cédula* reached New Spain in August 1774. Shortly thereafter, bishops and the Archbishop of Mexico began to carry out the prescribed enquiries to determine how many nuns wished to accept the new regimen. The result was a near defeat for the prelates' position. The majority of nuns were opposed to *vida común*. Bishop Victoriano López found that in his five convents 161 nuns out of 284 rejected the new system, well over half of them.⁶⁷ In Mexico City, the Provincial of the Franciscan Order, after visiting his convents, concluded that there was a conspiracy among the nuns against adherence. The Dominican Provincial of Mexico City reported that in Santa Catalina de Sena only seven of the sixty nuns followed the reform. In La Concepción of Oaxaca, "all nuns want to stay in the private life except one."⁶⁸ But the most stunning report came from the Archbishop of Mexico. In September 1774, after having examined the 601 professed nuns of his ten convents, he concluded that none favored the common life. The only encouraging reports came from the Bishop of Guadalajara, where all the nuns of the city's five convents and the one in Lagos had accepted the reform, as did the Dominican convent of Santa Catalina de Sena in Michoacán.⁶⁹ Even though *vida común* was backed by a royal decision, the majority of the nuns in New Spain remained unmoved and unconvinced about its merits.

In Puebla, Bishop Victoriano López noted that the reception of the reform varied from convent to convent. The most recalcitrant in rejecting it was La Concepción. San Jerónimo and La Santísima Trinidad had a majority accepting it, including those in its governing body. As for the rest, the young nuns had been more receptive than the older ones. This observation would be the base of a strategy adopted by the prelates: convince the young ones and admit only those novices that would abide by the new observance.⁷⁰

NO PEACE AFTER THE STORM

In 1774, the Crown decided to treat observance as a bureaucratic issue, disregarding the fact that the way of life within the cloisters was based on affective ties among the members of each community, and the emotional commitment of each professant to the convent of her choice. A significant part of that emotional tie was built during the novitiate, which taught the nuns to bind themselves to the community. To deny that bond or to substitute it for another was a grueling experience that, in 1774, many nuns were as yet unready to make. Those who adopted *vida común* left little or no evidence of their reasons. We can only infer that they were convinced by their prelates that *vida común* could lead to a more perfect life, one that would provide them with a greater certainty of their salvation. In the ensuing years prelates attempted to sway the novices' wills to *vida común*. This included some bargaining points, such as offering a novice entrance to a convent without a dowry, or promising her a post within the community.⁷¹

During the first half of 1775, personal and community protests continued and the prelates maintained their policy of enforcement, using confessors and the isolation of the opponents as the most effective means to persuade them to change their minds. In order to give the Crown the most optimistic idea about the progress of the common life, they sent continuous reports of "conversions." Nevertheless, for each adoption of *vida común* there was an incident. Such episodes were reported in the Dominican convents of Santa Catalina de Sena in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Puebla; and in Santa Inés in Puebla, and Balvanera in Mexico City. In each of these convents there were personal protests, refusals to admit novices in favor of *vida común*, and attempts to select abbesses from among nuns who opposed the reform.⁷² Novices who declared their unwillingness to profess under *vida común* were ordered out.⁷³

The prelates were concerned about the public learning too much about the problems in the convents, and feared the influence of either lay or religious persons who might support protests against the *vida común*. In May 1775, on the eve of the elections for new abbesses in Puebla's Santa Inés and Santa Catalina, the name of Rafael Manzanares surfaced as a possible outside influence, a "seducer" of the nuns against the advice of their prelates. Little is explained on the nature of his seductive persuasion, but without further ado, the viceroy ordered him expelled from town within twenty-four hours, and sent him to the city of Valladolid (Michoacán) where he was to report daily to the city's *alcalde*. He was forbidden to communicate with nuns, directly or indirectly.⁷⁴ However, not all interferences came from people outside the church. A staunch supporter of the reform was also indicted by the authorities for making inflammatory statements. José Ortega Moro, under the pen name of Jorge Más Teóforo, was a clergyman and confessor who published a tract in Puebla in 1774, under the title of "A Letter of Disabuse and Direction to a Religious." He inveighed against confessors who did not advise adoption of *vida común*, characterizing them as wolves disguised as lambs. Confessors were known to receive sweets, food, gifts, and even clothing from the nuns in the confessionals, creating dangerous liaisons. Ortega Moro advised nuns to abandon such practices, show docility and resignation, and learn how to love *vida común*. Christ had ordered it, and by rejecting it, they put their eternal salvation at risk. Anybody recommending against *vida común* was a liar, demented, and a blasphemous person. The showering of such insulting adjectives was mostly aimed at confessors of the regular Orders, and it was considered so incendiary that the civil authorities ordered the confiscation of the tract.⁷⁵

This tract also provoked grief among some nuns, one of whom was moved to write a comparison between the benefits of *vida común* and those offered by the traditional observance. Sor María Gertrudis Josefa de la Concepción, of the Convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla, asked that Más Teóforo's tract, which so deeply discredited them, be burned. But, the gist of her writing was to analyze the benefits she saw in their traditional way of life. Among the benefits of observance before *vida común* were a shared feeling of being part of every activity in the convent, the common understanding of the meaning of religious practices and faith in the basic sacraments that bonded them to God. What she resented about the enforcement of *vida común* were the consequences to those who, like her, did not follow it. She lacked spiritual help from confessors and felt abused by the accusations of those confessors who were politically invested in the reform. Gossip, disunion in the community, and preferential treatment for those who adopted *vida común* were hurting all of them. She felt that the politics of the world had invaded their cloister, and they had lost the freedom that enclosure had given them.⁷⁶

Amidst an atmosphere of incertitude and resentment there were few hopes of obtaining a reversal in the king's position. In June 1775, Charles III issued several *cédulas* making a series of recommendations to improve adoption of the common life, and approving all measures taken up to then by the prelates and civil authorities of New Spain. In October of that year, the attorney retained in Madrid by the convent of La Concepción wrote that there was no possibility of changing the Crown's stand on the reform, and advised them to give up their cause and follow the orders of their superiors, for no

more legal suits or petitions to be exempted from the common life were to be accepted.⁷⁷ On two occasions in 1775 and 1776, the king gave novices the option to accept or reject *vida común*. Any novice who had taken the first vows of profession before the *cédula* of June 23, 1775, should be free to choose to accept it or not.⁷⁸

Acquiescence to the king's will did not obliterate protests. The fire had only smoldered. It was evident that under the apparent calm in the cloisters there were incidents that corroborated the split within the communities. Mexico City had its share of internal tensions. In the convent of Balvanera the nuns denied profession to a novice who had promised to keep *vida común*. That was an open statement of refusal to accept the new regulations. In a similar gesture, the nuns of San Jerónimo and Santa Catalina de Sena refused to accept an abbess who followed *vida común*. La Concepción had refused to adopt *vida común* and had not accepted any novice for years.⁷⁹ San Lorenzo had expelled a novice who wished to adopt the reform, while in San Jerónimo three novices had to be persuaded into it by Archbishop Núñez de Haro. He had suspended all rights of the nuns opposed to the profession of novices into *vida común*, and threatened to suspend the licenses of the confessors whose "depraved opinions" could justify the nuns' resistance.⁸⁰ Tensions remained high, even though all struggled to show a peaceful façade to the city. In 1776, the Dominican nuns of Santa Catalina de Sena, in Oaxaca, sent letters and complaints to the Audiencia about being "tormented" by their prelates, denied absolution, and the right to complain. Obviously, by writing to the Audiencia they were disobeying such orders.⁸¹ The Audiencia's attorney found the nuns' report troubling. Such means of compulsion were neither "sensible" nor did they follow the letter and spirit of the king's wishes. He advised the *corregidor* of Oaxaca to find more about the situation using precaution and secrecy. Public scandal should be avoided.

In response to the nuns' charges, the Bishop of Antequera (Oaxaca) wrote a lengthy letter to Viceroy Bucareli dated January 6, 1777, that sheds much light on the climate of opinion surrounding the *vida común* and offers some important insights into the cause of discontent not only among the nuns, but among the prelates as well. He accused the nuns of his diocese of indulging in "the vice of leaf tobacco," sweets, and chocolate, as well as receiving clothes and personal wear from their families. Inside the cloisters, the convents were like tenements (*casas de vecindad*). He specifically pointed to La Concepción which, lacking the financial strength of Santa Catalina, he characterized as being in total financial disarray. The sight of nuns smoking and overindulging in a less than spiritual life displeased men such as the bishop, who simply did not tolerate the customs of Mexican nuns, and possibly dreamed of a community of silence and prayer, as they imagined late medieval convents might have been. He denied having exercised any pressure on the nuns, and claimed that thirty-seven of the fifty-five religious in the convent of Santa Catalina had spontaneously adopted *vida común*, although he admitted that some lacked spiritual help from their confessors.⁸² The cost of maintaining *vida común* in Santa Catalina was estimated at 12,000 pesos, a sum that exceeded by 4,300 pesos the previous conventual budget. Nevertheless, the bishop thought their expenses were sustainable and did not seem to be disturbed by the idea that five nuns had private incomes (*reservas*), a condition contrary to the ideology of *vida común*. He was, however, annoyed by the inconsistency of having two parallel systems of observance. He suspected that the dissenting nuns had been under "bad influence," which was the excuse used by their Dominican prelates to deny them access to the confessors of their choice. Since the protesters were Dominicans, he had no jurisdiction over them and did not want to interfere.

The convent of La Santísima Trinidad in Puebla had appealed to the pope through his representative (*nuncio*) in Madrid, expressing its grievances over the bishop's treatment. The papal envoy in the Spanish court notified the king who, in September 1777, ordered a confidential enquiry to verify the truthfulness of the nuns' reports. The king was also interested in learning who had drafted the nuns' suit, since the *cédula* of 1774 forbade any further appeals. The reason was that their plaintiff's statement to the pope contained some troubling proposals. One of them was the threat of rescission of their profession with the return of their dowries, and the other was the request to remove them to convents in Mexico City where they felt more protected. While the viceroy could not venture an opinion on the feasibility of the rescission of vows, he saw problems in the restitution of their moneys in either case.⁸³ He surmised that the suggestion of returning to lay life could have only been a product of a legal mind, because nuns never expressed any desire to abandon their chosen lives.

The complaints about lack of freedom to choose or reject *vida común* filed by La Santísima Trinidad in Puebla had some results. In 1777, the king advised the Bishop of Puebla to leave the nuns of his diocese in complete liberty of choice with regard to the reform. In his private correspondence with the viceroy, Bishop Victoriano López engaged in continuous accusations against the nuns. In a letter dated August 13, 1777, he complained about the abandonment of religious observance in nunneries, especially in La Concepción and La Santísima Trinidad. He claimed that his efforts to use benevolence with them had failed because the rebels did not want to observe even the most elementary rules of discipline.⁸⁴ He accused the nuns of having invented their facts in order to destroy the establishment of *vida común*, and characterized the incidents mentioned by the nuns as typical examples of women's weakness of character and "inevitable in a sex so scarce in advice and abundant in caprices."⁸⁵ His gender bias remained unchanged.

Even though Viceroy Bucareli supported the reform wholeheartedly and believed the Bishop of Puebla had adopted generous measures to deal with the expulsion of girls and servants, he was overcome by a sense of despair. Early in February of 1778, he confessed that he had never had so many difficulties in judging what the most adequate steps were to deal with the nuns and *vida común*, or what was the most equitable decision, given the intensity of emotions aroused by the reform. He still felt that he had to lend an ear to those nuns who desired to retain the traditional way of life.⁸⁶ Secret investigations took place again, resulting in several reports. One of them was signed by Gaspar de Portolá, former governor of Puebla, and was extremely unfavorable to all prelates. He stated that the nuns who had not accepted the common life were being mistreated and obliged to follow the new way of life; the tolerance prescribed by the king was not practiced. Friars and confessors who obtained the conversion of nuns were rewarded with promotions. Financially, the establishment of the common life had reduced the income of the convents. A second report was signed by three unreformed nuns from the convent of Santa Catalina de Sena, who complained of being ill-treated and stated that many had adopted *vida común* to spare trouble to their own relatives, who were members of the church.⁸⁷ A third report was signed by lawyer Felix Venancio Malo, of the Audiencia, who considered it impossible to obtain an unbiased opinion about *vida común* given the variety of interests and personal opinions concerning it. He thought that allowing two different types of religious discipline within the same convent was ill-advised. This last document offered quite a sober opinion concerning the situation, but Portolá's report confirmed many of the nuns' complaints, suggesting that there was much unnecessary pressure upon them.

The exhaustive round of reports, accusations, and counteraccusations began to ebb when, in August 1778, the Crown sent to Puebla the president of the Holy Office in Mexico City, Manuel Ruiz Vallejo, and one oidor of the Audiencia, Ruperto V. Luyando. They were charged with investigating the events that had taken place in that city since 1774.⁸⁸ Their agenda was to try to settle the problems created by the reform. They carried a questionnaire with over twenty items on the fulfillment of the common life, such as whether both the nuns of the private life and those of the common life were well provided with food and money for their expenses, whether nuns of the private life were prevented from having maids, and whether they were pressed to

follow the common life. The royal envoys had the full cooperation of Bishop Victoriano López during their stay in Puebla. Their investigation began in December 1778, and they interviewed nuns, the heads of all Orders, city councilors, chaplains, and notable citizens. All of the men gave favorable reports about the bishop and the manner in which he conducted the reform. Most of the nuns who were presumed to be protesting failed to provide evidence of bad treatment, though some requested to be sent to convents where the private life was observed. They may have been awed by the dignitaries and inhibited by the sheer pressure behind this visit, and life within divided communities.⁸⁹

The final report was ready early in 1779, and reached the king late in the same year. Since the report stated that the bishop's conduct was justified, the king gave the reform his final approval in a 1780 *cédula*. However, he reminded Bishop López that, although *vida común* was regarded as ideal in order to achieve religious perfection, nuns should not be counseled that it was necessary for salvation.⁹⁰ In 1781, an enquiry concerning the number of nuns adopting the *vida común* in Puebla showed that in the five convents under episcopal authority, 119 nuns followed the *vida común* and 125 the private life. Over one dozen novices had promised to accept the former. The bishop was again instructed to respect their choice and to preserve the peace finally achieved after such a troublesome decade.⁹¹

PRELATES AND NUNS: GENDERS AT ODD

The attempt to reform observance in Mexican nunneries obviously created unexpected tensions between the sexes and an unprecedented degree of animosity. There were clearly delineated viewpoints that reflected the nuns' feelings as opposed to the masculine desire to impose order and extract obedience. The men were intent on teaching the women how to practice religion and how to conduct their lives, following their own understanding. The rift among nuns prevented the assumption of a united front representing female versus male. Nonetheless, a distinct female voice emerges from the documents signed by dissenters and supporters. A male and a female culture are discernible in the nuances of language as well as in the facts emerging from the abundant documentation produced by this process.

An exchange of letters and a confrontation of Sor María Guadalupe del Espíritu Santo and Sor Catalina del Santísimo Rosario, and their abbess, Sor María de Santa Teresa—nuns of the Dominican convent of Santa Catalina in Mexico—and Fr. José George de Alfaro y Acevedo, their Father Provincial, illustrates how recalcitrant nuns developed tactics of daily resistance to the imposition of *vida común* observance, and how prelates responded to them. In November 1774, Sor María Guadalupe and Sor Catalina were ready to "give up" *vida común*. Sor María Guadalupe stated that after one month's trial she could not follow it without physical and spiritual harm.⁹² Both complained about the food. Some of the characterizations of the latter are: "The food is to be thanked for, but not to be eaten," "everything is scarce," and "*vida común* is nothing but a Royal Bistro" (*La Fonda Real*).⁹³ Sor Catalina demanded to have chocolate with cinnamon on a daily basis, as well as chicken and *agua de nieve*, as prescribed by her physician.⁹⁴ On their spiritual health, Sor María Guadalupe stated that she had not taken communion for twenty-five days and would not do it until she felt herself prepared. One way of expressing their protest was to abstain from receiving the incarnate flesh of the Lord, an act of rebellion assured to be noticed by the convent's chaplain or their confessor. Yet, this form of rebellion posed a spiritual threat to whoever engaged in it. The nuns wrote to their abbess and to the Provincial of the Dominican Order, begging them to be allowed to return to their former way of life. Healthwise, they felt weakened (*quebrantada salud*); spiritually, they were lacking the most essential consolation of religious life.

Their abbess Sor María de Santa Teresa, was frustrated and anxious. She did not know how to handle these protesting nuns, who refused to eat food from the kitchen; returned bread, candles, and all the provisions sent to them under *vida común*; and demanded their own customary monthly allowance. She sought advice from the Provincial. In the end she took the path of least resistance and agreed to provide the nuns with their allowance in addition to smaller sums for fruit, medicines, and cigarettes! The abbess was annoyed and felt her authority was diminished, but she was also aware that Sor María Guadalupe and Sor Catalina had good social connections inside and outside the convent, and she wanted to avoid possible rumors and public awareness of rifts within the convent. The protesting nuns were self-assertive and outspoken within the confines of "obedience." On November 14, Sor Catalina wrote that the convent lacked the ability to provide for her needs and it was not entitled to make her suffer; therefore she should be allowed to withdraw from *vida común*. She informed the Provincial that she had not renounced her natural rights, and that she felt her health and life threatened under *vida común*, especially since she lacked the help of her maid, who was sick due to overwork in the convent.

For her part, Sor María de Guadalupe told Fr. José that she recognized that she was the Judas of her community, but apparently this did not bother her. On the contrary, she accused the prelate of not having responded to her previous request, with the result that she and Sor Catalina found themselves "slaves under the law" instead of "free under the protection of the grace [of God]." Adding a new twist to the situation, she added she did not wish the Provincial to become the laughingstock of Mexico, since rumors about him were flying in all directions. With this she suggested that the rumors about the problems in the convent were unflattering to him and he had more to lose than she did. The references to "natural rights," and the "moral obligation" of the convent to provide them with their living needs, followed by their withdrawal from communion, were a clear indication that they understood that their isolation in the convent could be put to use on their own behalf. These women might have been respectful, but they were not submissive. They stood their ground before their superiors with studied calculation. They also seemed to have adopted "enlightened" terms about the right of the king's subjects and the mercy of God. While not all nuns can be assumed to have been as bold, those protesting developed tactics and language that seemed to have surprised their religious superiors.

The response of Fr. José George to Sor Catarina del Rosario, written on January 5, 1775, reflected the stern and intransigent position taken by male authorities, as well as their spiritual standpoint. As expected, he assumed that women were to obey their prelates' and the king's orders. He reminded her that she had had fifteen days to accept the new regime, and since she had done so, she had no recourse or reason to complain. In his view, she had failed to understand that *vida común* was a life of mortification geared toward spiritual benefits of the soul, and under no circumstance was it intended to bring her comfort. Had she understood its true meaning, she would have taken delight in the food provided by the community. She should pray to her Holy Mother (the Virgin Mary) asking her to teach her how to live as she should. Like other religious authorities supporting *vida común*, he assumed that discomfort was part of it and did not flinch an eye when he prescribed it. He had resolved to teach the nuns a lesson and remained unmoved in the course of reform.⁹⁵

This exchange typifies the antagonistic position taken by prelates and nuns. Within the church, the culture of gender relations was outwardly straightforward: men ordered and women obeyed. However, in the past nuns had refused to follow orders blindly, and their male superiors should not have forgotten that. By reminding the nuns that it was their duty to obey, while at the same time insisting that their obedience should be based on their own free will, Fr. José George expected to counter the nuns' challenge of "natural rights." These verbal games had deeper meanings than both parties were aware of. The nuns were using the tactic of "pluralizing patriarchs," as suggested by Steve Stern, by appealing to two other "fathers" who were above their own prelate.⁹⁶ The king was one. He was the ultimate male authority in this world, and to him they would address their complaints because

they expected him to be just. The highest father was God, who meted out the ultimate justice they expected to receive. Those two male figures countered the reasoning and imperatives of their own prelates.

The display of defiance by the nuns was sometimes direct. Sor Catalina and Sor Guadalupe boycotted the first visit of Victoriano López in February 1775, pretending to have a “heart attack” and threatening to hang themselves amidst crying and screaming. It was a peculiarly feminine tactic, fitting their times and male expectations. Fearing public gossip, Bishop Victoriano left. He sent at least two other prelates to appease the nuns, one of them Sor Guadalupe’s own confessor, to no avail. Eventually, the bishop, accompanied by the Dominican Provincial and the Governor of Puebla, attempted once again to see the sisters. One of the nuns refused to see them on grounds that she was “taking a bath,” while the other excused herself, but still asked for her daily chocolate spiced with vanilla.⁹⁷ Such mockery of any dignity, let alone three of them, was unheard of.

The Franciscan Provincial in Mexico City expressed surprise and almost disbelief in the nuns’ will to resist. He reported the willingness of some novices to accept *vida común*, but noted that in Santa Clara and San Juan de la Penitencia the abbesses had, on their own, admitted others who would not follow it. When asked to furnish the profession documents, which had to be approved by the prelates, they alleged to have lost them.⁹⁸ The nuns could be forced to appear in the parlor, but they could evade giving up documents. The Provincial not only suspected a conspiracy among the nuns, but also that someone from outside was encouraging them in noncompliance. He was reluctant to accept the fact that the nuns could have been acting on their own initiative, devising such tricks and dilatory tactics. This type of paternalistic assumption implicitly denied the nuns agency to devise their own means of passive resistance. How the Provincial reached the conclusion of outside influence was puzzling, since there was abundant evidence to the contrary. His assumption was more a reflection of his own naïveté than the nuns’ capacity for intrigues. In these instances, the weak females challenged the powerful male by using the prerogatives of their sex and their religious state, the same factors on which religious and civil authorities had counted to obtain a docile acceptance.⁹⁹

Another nuance in this gendered battle of principles is that related to material comforts the nuns wished to retain. *Vida particular*, understood as the management of their own money, the assistance of maids, and the enjoyment of food they preferred to eat, was too important a tradition to those who professed under the assumption that these conveniences were not at odds with their spiritual life. The Provincial, like others at the time, associated attachment to the comforts of life with lack of “spirituality.” Nunneries had a reputation for their cooking, and food expressed a cultural trait that could not be easily dismissed. Their prelates painted them as spoiled spirits more interested in eating sweets and chocolate than in pleasing their divine husband, but the nuns took much pride in the dishes they developed in their kitchens, which had sometimes helped celebrate civic functions and were part of their understanding of hospitality. Their taste had become accustomed to specific ways of dressing up their food, spicing their dishes with local products, and creating a “Mexican” way of cooking. All religious occasions were marked by special dishes, some of which were also prepared for their confessors, the visits of prelates to the cloister, or the patrons of the convent.¹⁰⁰ To give up such tradition was not easy.

In this gender conflict, prelates portrayed dissident nuns as insidious liars who were seeking disruption rather than accepting the ordered harmony of the utopian *vida común* convent. Their intent was to smear the nuns’ reputation and depict them as untrustworthy women, a picture that put them closer to popular culture stereotypes of women as crafty and manipulative regardless of their civil state. Archbishop Lorenzana was bitter about the fact that the nuns had never complained directly to him and that the dissidents had used “exquisite artifices, always hiding their hand” while kindling “an infernal fire” with their activities.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, the church leaders charged the nuns with contumacy and weaknesses, defects characteristic of their gender. Secular authorities were less confrontational with the nuns than ecclesiastical authorities, because their task was to find a solution to the problem, not to test their authority over them. Even so, Viceroy Bucareli could not escape his times, and his opinions were tinted by a tone of condescension toward the nuns. In February 1772, he advised Fabián y Fuero to continue using a gentle approach toward the cloistered women to prevent arousing their anger, because “the anger of women is more terrible than men’s anger. Once women express it publicly they leave little margin for reflection, and they care less about their consequences than the fulfillment of their whim.”¹⁰²

Bishop Victoriano López was one of the worst offenders in terms of gender prejudice, while depicting himself as a tolerant, patient, and even a suffering minister. His response to Viceroy Bucareli’s request, in August 13, 1777, to respect the choice of those nuns who did not accept *vida común*, was full of innuendos and accusations against them. Yet, he assumed the role of a benevolent father, stating that he forgave them as “poor women who are acting under suggestion and without much prudence.” He cited a nun who confessed to him that she hated those under *vida común* to the point of wanting to attack them. By citing this opinion he raised the issue of how women fought against each other within the cloisters, creating schisms among themselves that were hard to heal, and giving their male superiors grounds for insisting on stern discipline. Intolerant of subversion, Bishop López resented, above all, the “notorious rebelliousness and contempt of his authority” among the nuns of La Concepción in his diocese.¹⁰³ Nuns simply fell into the category of “female” and thus were marked by their sex to be contained and controlled by the more rational men. The entire process of implementing *vida común* was tainted by the prelates’ deeply rooted view of women as an “alien other” who had to be guided into a better understanding of what was good for them in their chosen state, and whose disagreement over that matter would only be tolerated under great duress.

THE OUTCOME OF THE REFORM

In the 1780s, *vida común* was not discussed in the public arena to the same degree it had been throughout the preceding decade. Since the Crown had forbidden any further appeals, the issue no longer preoccupied the higher echelons of the bureaucracy. After the death of Charles III (1788), interest in the reform gradually declined. The question remains as to what extent this reform was really practiced in New Spain. There is evidence that at the end of the century *la vida común* was far from being observed. The traditional form of life (*vida particular*) continued to be observed by a part of the community in all convents.

The reform was not complete, inasmuch as it could not change the Rules and Constitutions of convents, and had to be implemented on the basis of restoring their original meaning and purity as interpreted by the prelates.¹⁰⁴ On these grounds, convents could always argue that they were observing the foundational guidelines of their Order, which for the most part did not specifically oblige them to follow the regime the regalist prelates wished to enforce. The nuns were further strengthened by the doubts expressed by some theologians, including Cardinal de Luca, Benedict XIV, as well as several Mexican prelates, as to the necessity or wisdom of a change to the nuns’ way of life.¹⁰⁵

The three basic aims of the reform were the expulsion of servants, the expulsion of *niñas*, and the adoption of community life. In practice, although reduced in number, many servants continued to serve the communities, and nuns who did not follow the reformed life were still allowed to retain one servant for their personal help. According to the census of 1790, the religious population of the convents of Mexico City consisted of 888 professed nuns and 35 novices. The convents of *descalced* nuns had no personal servants. In those of *calzadas* (shod) there were 211 serving the communities, in

addition to 732 serving privately. Thus, the number of servants exceeded that of professed nuns.¹⁰⁶ With regard to girls and seculars, the reform was partially fulfilled, but only for a limited amount of time. Due to the lack of space in schools, and other personal considerations such as charity toward orphans or the old age of seculars attached to the convent for a long time, not all girls and women were expelled from convents.¹⁰⁷ In 1796, a royal *cédula* again officially permitted the education of girls in convents due to the lack of alternative educational centers.¹⁰⁸ With this *cédula* one of the basic objectives of the reform was abandoned. Although motivated by financial reasons, the Bishop of Michoacán ended *vida común* for the convent of La Purísima in San Miguel el Grande.¹⁰⁹

Hipólito Villaroel, writing in 1785 on “the infirmities suffered by nunneries,” pointed out that not all of the convents of Mexico City followed the common life and that in most of them nuns continued to administer their own income and provide their own meals.¹¹⁰ Deficiencies in the observance of communal life must have been widespread enough to move Archbishop Lizana Beaumont (1802–11) to write a Pastoral Letter on the subject in 1803.¹¹¹ Though he had made no initial comments on the nunneries after taking possession of his diocese, he declared that the duties of his ministry compelled him to address the nuns concerning the lack of common life that he found in most of the nunneries. He argued that the vow of poverty could not be observed without the common life. He also criticized the large number of servants who were still living in the convents. The archbishop’s desires remained unfulfilled. Serious economic and political problems diverted the attention of the civil and ecclesiastic authorities from observance to the survival of nunneries as institutions. Women’s convents suffered financial losses due to the execution of the Law of Consolidación between 1806 and 1810, which demanded forced loans of some of their capital to the Crown. The political and social disturbances that led to the independence of Mexico from Spain began to take a toll in the number of women who wished to profess as nuns.

Thus, throughout the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the reformed life was still not fully observed in the cloisters, though prelates continued to pay lip service to some of its premises. In 1826, the prebendary (*prebendado*) of the Archbishopric of Mexico, Juan B. Arechederreta, wrote to the abbesses of the convents of Mexico City, reminding them of a series of directives (*ordenanzas*) on the presence of girls and servants compiled by Archbishop Lorenzana almost fifty years before. He observed that they were still valid.¹¹² This indicates that in 1826 *vida común* was not fully practiced. The figures assembled by Arechederreta regarding the population and financial situation of the nineteen convents of Mexico City at this time suggest that most convents had returned to their traditional way of life. In that year, there were 485 girls and 809 servants in the city’s convents. The former were 320 more than in 1790 and the latter had decreased by only slightly more than a hundred. In subsequent years nunneries were drained of income, and with rapidly declining numbers of women willing to profess, the issue of *vida común* remained moot.¹¹³

As seen a posteriori, the movement of reform appears as part of a broader plan to revamp the colonial government, improve the deficiencies of religious practices, change the culture of religious observance among the regulars, and redefine church and state relations. Not coincidentally, the arrival of José de Gálvez, the stern royal visitor in charge of implementing substantial administrative and economic reforms in New Spain, occurred in 1765. He believed that “the subjects of the great monarch who occupies the throne of Spain must learn that they were born to be silent and to obey, and not to discuss or give opinions on the highest affairs of the government.”¹¹⁴ It was in the same spirit that Bishops Fabián y Fuero and Victoriano López and Archbishop Lorenzana approached the subject of *vida común*. It was an issue of authority exercised without any margin for dissent and translated into a gendered contestation. It resulted in patterns of female behavior that surprised the men involved in this tortuous process. They believed that these cloistered women would bow to their orders, an underestimation of their capacity to analyze their own feelings and their understanding of observance, as well as their ability to organize their own resistance to unwanted changes in their lives. The brides of Christ had their feet squarely on the ground in matters that affected the governance of their institutions; they knew how to assess their grievances and their priorities, compare the advantages they saw in their old form of observance with those offered by the new system, present their arguments respectfully but forcefully to their superiors, communicate among each other, and define strategies within their own communities.

It would be tempting to see these events as examples of general resistance and revolt, but this would distort the spirit of conventual discipline. While it is true that nuns resisted in large numbers, the resistance was not shared by all. Many felt that their own spiritual inner peace rested in observing obedience, and their choice to accept *vida común* was the result of their own decision, not of the commands of their prelates. Those who did not share this view and voiced their opposition clearly and lucidly represent an alternative way of understanding their own spiritual freedom. For them their superiors had no right to subvert and change their Rules and traditional forms of observance, which were more precious to them than blind obedience to misguided prelates. Both were acceptable forms of interpreting religious life and both had precedents within the church. There is more blame on the side of prelates, who followed inappropriate policies in forcing their own viewpoint on the nuns. The Crown did not foresee the consequences of its desired wish to reform observance in the nunneries, and it played an ambiguous role in the local confrontations. In trying to find an equitable solution to the controversial results of its policies, it followed what it believed was a reasonable path of compromise. However, by allowing two forms of observance to coexist in the same convent, it undermined the effectiveness of the proposed reform. In the end nothing changed much, a proof that a stroke of the pen cannot undo the practice of centuries. In their own respectful but persistent ways, the women who decided against *vida común* held their own. In doing so they also left behind evidence that they had the strength of their convictions.

CHAPTER TEN

Writing in the Cloisters

“I have experienced that at the time of writing everything becomes serene and I have freedom to express my sorrows, and as I put them down my soul discovers the light of what I am saying.”



In the preceding chapters I have surveyed personal motivational beliefs, religious practices, forms of worship, social hierarchies, personal transgressions, institutional reforms, interactions between prelates and nuns, and other themes that make the history of convents and nuns a rich and complex subject. At this point it is obvious that religious communities housed women of all temperaments and many different abilities. Among the latter was literacy, which made nuns a special group of women surrounded by a large number of illiterate females within and outside the convent. Reading and writing were tools of privilege for women, mostly those belonging to well-to-do families, although increasingly, urban women of some means received a basic education in reading and writing, especially in the eighteenth century.¹ Certainly, the social extraction of nuns explains the fact that most of them came to the convent with a basic instruction. Religious orders demanded literacy from its members for a practical reason: convents had to be run by women capable of institutional management. Illiteracy had no place in highly organized communities with a multiplicity of financial interests, and with the need to maintain communication with a literate male governing body. On intellectual and religious levels, the ability to read religious works was a source of improving and enriching their faith, and essential to learning the discipline and rituals of observance of their Rules.² By the eighteenth century, literacy and management responsibilities were not exclusive to the white women who could become nuns. They were also required of indigenous women who populated the first convents for Indian nuns in Mexico.³ Elite indigenous families educated their women to meet the standards of Spanish families, and once they were fully in charge of their religious communities, Indian nuns fulfilled their administrative and pious obligations efficiently.

While nunneries never possessed extensive libraries, unlike some of their male counterparts, reading was practiced at a personal level and, in some convents, during refectory time.⁴ Inventories of the material possessions of some nuns indicate that some of them had books in their cells for their own use, sometimes as many as more than thirty books.⁵ Unfortunately, those inventories often mentioned the books without registering the titles, classifying them by their size—large or small—and assigning them a given value. Some brief notations help to identify some of the books. Breviaries, Books of the Rules of their Order, and books of the weekly prayer routines (*semaneros*) appear in some inventories. The prayer books could be specialized ones for Holy Week and for Christmas, for example, or devotions to some saints. At her death in 1684, Sor Manuela Ludovina of San Bernardo had borrowed one copy of *El Crítico* from a male friend. This was a recently published satirical writing by the irreverent Jesuit Baltasar Gracián (1601–58). This surprising find suggests that once in a while nuns moved away from their prayers into mundane contemporary readings. Since *El Crítico* finds eternity in Rome, it was still a morally instructive book. Sor Manuela also had borrowed two devotional books from a priest and *owned* several herself, as well as a cookbook (*arte de cocina*).⁶ Altogether, these inventories of nonexceptional nuns tell that reading was mostly of a devotional character. It may well be that some nuns better known for their higher learning owned a larger and more diverse collection, such as that which Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz obviously possessed.

Writing was a more relevant tool in the convent, and put to use frequently and creatively. Hundreds of formal and informal letters were written throughout the end of the eighteenth century by abbesses and officials engaged in the administration of their communities. In fewer numbers, those with an ability to go beyond the epistolary genre wrote didactic and devotional tracts, poems, theatrical pieces, biographies, chronicles, and intimate spiritual writings. The latter are difficult to define as a specific genre, being ambiguous in their conception and execution. They were “diaries” or “letters” addressed to their confessors describing their personal feelings, self-doubts, and visionary experiences. They may be considered autobiographical in nature, insofar as they were recollections of their own lives. Previously dismissed as unreliable sources of information, they are receiving increasing attention as expressions of conventual and religious culture. Regardless of whether they belong to any formal category of written expression, their value is indisputable, since they illustrate for us the minds, values, and attitudes of those who wrote them. Because writing was a key component of nuns’ lives, I will survey here some significant features of the circumstances that encouraged writing among nuns, and several of the diverse forms of expression it adopted without attempting to cover them all.

There was a long-standing tradition of women writers within the Catholic Church, before and after the Reformation movement that split Christianity’s ancient trunk. In the European Middle Ages, women wrote about their intimate spiritual experiences, and their works form a significant corpus that is under intense analysis today.⁷ Spain arrived slightly late onto the scene of women’s literary and mystical writings, but by the end of the sixteenth century there was a stream of religious and laywomen’s compositions that would function as models for the works of their sisters across the Atlantic Ocean.⁸ As expected with any innovation that would challenge the hegemony men had over writing, these works were regarded with suspicion by those who controlled writing as an intellectual expression. They could either obstruct or delay publication of women’s work. Teresa of Avila, her unique religious vocation notwithstanding, was subjected to inquisitorial revision for her writings and criticism for her foundational activities.⁹

Criticism was also directed against other Spanish women whose writings of visionary experiences were not totally acceptable to a traditional male hierarchy, for whom the greatest virtue in women was silence and obedience. While approving the autobiography of Sor Isabel de Jesús, one of the appointed ecclesiastic reviewers of her work declared that he began reading it “with the greatest repugnance . . . because I did not think it was right that

a woman should write on doctrine for the public when there are so many books by very learned men.”¹⁰ Isabel Ortiz, a sixteenth-century beata who gained a deserved reputation as a spiritual advisor and wrote a small book on meditation and prayer, incurred the Inquisition examiner’s disapproval. His opinion was that “a woman’s book should not be approved or printed . . .”, following Paul’s prohibition of women docents in the church.¹¹ This was the spirit that led prelates to exercise strict vigilance over women’s writings, confining them to manuscript form in conventual archives or, worse, destroying them.

Facing constrictions similar to those in the motherland, and without a monastic tradition to support their efforts, no woman that we know of wrote any literary work or spiritual tract in sixteenth-century Mexico.¹² Josefina Muriel’s *Cultura femenina novohispana* first called attention to the many written works by women during the colonial period, and a few of them have received some attention in the last twenty years.¹³ When writing began to flourish in the following century, it did so under significant restrictions. Nuns writing in the seventeenth century remained anonymous behind the walls of their institutions and hidden from the public eye of readers. The exception was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose monumental literary genius was beyond hiding. Even so, her writings made their way out of her convent of San Jerónimo mostly in handwritten copies, with some printed in small numbers in Mexico City. The first attempt to publish her entire work took place in Spain in 1689 and as a result of the personal interest of her friend the ex-vicereine of New Spain, María Luisa Gonzaga Manrique de Lara, Countess of Paredes and Marquise of La Laguna.¹⁴ The fate of religious women’s writings changed slightly in the eighteenth century when some of their works were printed and the authors acknowledged, although the numbers of published religious women authors was not large. Spiritual diaries and other incidental writings related to worship and festive occasions remained in the conventual archives after the nuns’ deaths. Some were burned by their authors, who saw them as a means to confide their most intimate religious feelings to their confessors, but not as literary pieces to be read by anyone else or worth remembering. Other writings have simply disappeared, and even today many are kept in private archives not easily accessible to the reading public.¹⁵ On rare occasions, such as the celebrations for the canonization of Saint John of the Cross in 1729, the public call for a poetic contest encouraged nuns to enter their poems. Out of a total of nine women submitting their poems to the judges, two were nuns, who saw their poems published in 1730. One of them, from the convent of San Jerónimo, did not reveal her name; the second one was Sor Catalina Josefa de San Francisco, from La Concepción.¹⁶ Poetry, with the exception of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was not the most important genre cultivated by nuns.¹⁷

On reviewing this body of works, its most striking characteristic is that the most intimate and religiously significant of them, the spiritual diaries, were written as a result of the orders of their confessors. Against a background of lack of confidence in women’s spiritual orthodoxy, confessors urged their spiritual daughters to put their experiences on paper. This enabled them to read the nuns’ writings as part of their pastoral task of supervising and controlling the health of their charges’ souls. These documents were requested in regular weekly or monthly installments, and were sources of evidence beyond the oral testimony of confession. Confessors, as the only men with close access to the nuns, exercised a very special form of authority established by canonical tradition, and understanding their role in the promotion of writing among nuns is essential in understanding the nature and modes of expression these women adopted.

THE CONFESSOR AS INITIATOR AND MEDIATOR

The communication that took place in the confessional between confessor and spiritual daughter was secret, but as the nun wrote beyond her confessional experience, the product of her recollections offered her and her spiritual director the opportunity to learn about levels of her beliefs that may not have been well-expressed, or expressed at all, during the confessional act. Thus, a confessor prompting a nun to write generated a form of evidence and knowledge that might otherwise not have been taken into account in judging her. Not every religious woman received a command to write. Before ordering a nun to write the confessor had to perceive intellectual ability or/and complex and unusual spiritual life. As well, not all religious women wrote about their intimate experiences. Some exercised their writing aptitude in historical accounts, biographies, devotional works, and even theatrical pieces. Arguably, when they undertook those tasks they were not necessarily prompted or obliged by a confessor. Thus, in general, writing of a literary quality represents exceptional women.

From spiritual letters and diaries, as well as from biographies and books of religious advice, we learn about the nature of the confessional relationship and the intellectual bonding between confessor and nun.¹⁸ As they wrote, nuns addressed the confessors in terms evoking both submission to their judgment as well as an established confidence or, at least, knowledge about their character. This knowledge served them to develop strategies to bypass the confessor’s authority to express themselves more freely, without incurring unorthodox beliefs or a breach in the respect owed to him. Confession led to a mutual understanding between the confessor and his spiritual daughter that, although not to be confused with familiarity, developed from their repeated interaction. This knowledge of each other meant that confessors could be influenced by their daughters, resulting in an inversion of hierarchies. Being awed by their spiritual daughters’ contacts with the divine, some confessors developed admiration and reverence for their pupils, and some wrote their biographies as their last tribute to the women they had directed. This point should not be overemphasized, but neither should it be neglected.

Despite rhetorical claims of lacking the desire to write, nuns would sublimate that task and see in it an acceptable form of “suffering,” not unwelcome in their state. By writing, they discharged their conscience, a process akin to self-confession, and clarified their doubts about their own spiritual life and needs. They needed an interlocutor in order to open their souls, and the confessor was that person. In theory, he would understand their mental processes, their language, and the roots of their anxieties. While this was not always the case, nuns had few alternatives. Friendship and the exchange of spiritual concerns with another sister in religion may have existed, but they have left few written tracks. Carmelite Marina de la Cruz’s spiritual friendship with a young Inés de la Cruz, while they were at the convent of Jesús María, left no records behind except the mention of the exchange they carried out in their mutual spiritual support.¹⁹ Biographies of other nuns written by their sisters in religion record their lives in the community or accounts of their visions, but not the ties expected among kindred souls. Personal diaries and spiritual letters are testimonies of experiences lived in solitude, and are the reflections of souls deeply immersed in their own world.

The nature of the relationship between the nun and her confessor(s) remains a subject of intense scrutiny.²⁰ The intimacy of their bond can only be inferred from comments in the nuns’ own writings and similar references by a few confessors who left some explanation of what their spiritual daughters meant to them. The terms of confessional exchange were based on the assumption of power conferred to the confessor by his ministry. He was in place of God, administering God’s justice, and the nun came to him as a suppliant in search of advice and judgment. She was bound to him by the vow of obedience as well as by faith, and while she could leave him and find another one more suitable to her needs, the demoralizing effects of a break with a confessor must have weighed heavily on any nun’s conscience.²¹ Kathleen Myers has observed that in the “mystic triad” formed by God, the confessor, and the nun, the terms of engagement were plastic and liable to change.²² While the authority of the confessor was conferred by God, when a nun claimed

to have received the word of God directly, she gained an authority that was, arguably, equal to that of the confessor.²³ Nonetheless, this was not acceptable to the church, and the hierarchical distance between nun and confessor was officially maintained. Doubtless, this intellectual and spiritual dialogue, as the source of most of the important works produced by nuns, was liable to offer many delicate variations resulting from numerous personal circumstances that were always charged with tensions intrinsic to their nature.

The nuances of spiritual writings reflect such circumstances. In some instances we see the desperate need for guidance in some nuns, while others gained a measure of self-confidence and self-control through the act of writing. For example, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, of the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia in Mexico, would write that God asked her to tell her confessor what to do about her and how to direct her.²⁴ This was no obstacle to her writing later on how much she needed his advice. When she wrote, she was impelled by a double feeling: to suffer through the exercise as a form of mortification, and to find God in her soul and avoid offending him. The confessor was her witness.²⁵ This was the most common assumption behind conventual writings. On the other hand, in witnessing the nun's experience, the confessor could be drawn into it by subtle forms of spiritual seduction or by the inclusive affective ties woven by the nun herself. The letters written to her confessor by Sor María Ignacia del Niño Jesús, a Franciscan Clare in Querétaro, exude an almost naïve familiarity with her "*padrecito*," Fr. Manuel Sancho de Valle. She wrote over seventy letters to him possibly between 1801 and 1802, in which she assumed she was the intermediary between God and Fr. Manuel.²⁶ Feeling very close to him, she included him in her own dialogues with God, pleaded for him and his family, and once related to him how their two souls, his inside of hers, had received the blessings of the Lord. These examples suggest that while devoted to their confessors and respectful of the hierarchy, at a personal level the bonds that tied nun and confessor were unique, intense, susceptible to emotional surges and, ultimately, a universe which is revealed to us by intriguing epistolary examples or diaries written in the quiet seclusion of their cells. The act of confession was also "fathering" performed in a very direct and frequent manner. Confessors were conscious of their power and their duties and tested them, sometimes relentlessly, sometimes compassionately. The action and reaction of father and daughter to each other should be examined in greater detail than I am allowed here but, unquestionably, they engaged in a complex exchange that could encompass affection, grueling acceptance, adversarial challenges of authority, complicity in the acceptance of gender roles, intimacy bordering on unsafe grounds, and the creation and shaping of a world of piety shared by two persons of different sexes.

Perhaps the most prolific writer under confessional order was Sor María de San José (d. 1719), who professed in the Augustinian convent of Santa Mónica, in Puebla. Author of more than 2,000 pages of manuscript, her writings exemplify the nature of the spiritual writings that began to develop in Mexico in the seventeenth century. They remained unpublished until rediscovered in the twentieth century by Kathleen Myers, who has written extensively on them.²⁷ Myers points out how her writings were finely tuned to the guidance of her several confessors. María de San José wrote for five different confessors, and was more assertive and sure about her own spiritual life with some than with others. In her case, as in the case of other nuns, confidence in the understanding of confession and writing depended on the mutual trust and the degree of confidence the confessor had in the orthodoxy of the nun's faith, visions, and observance of conventual rules. Patient confessors could ease nuns into writing or simply confessing cogently the entangled mass of their emotions and spiritual experiences.²⁸ Fr. Joseph Gómez, confessor to Sor Antonia de San Jacinto, of Santa Clara in Querétaro, recalled the many hours he spent in the confessional with the nun, listening to her emotional expressions of love for Christ and, at the same time, gaining respect for her spiritual life.²⁹ Other confessors would remain distant or make demands for writing that burdened their spiritual daughters; still others would "try" the nuns' veracity with tests that left bitter memories with the latter. Carmelite Isabel de la Encarnación, who professed in 1613 and was a strong visionary, was subjected to many questions, even exorcism, by suspicious confessors. Only the intervention of a Carmelite confessor and later the guidance of the well-known Irish Jesuit theologian Miguel Godínez, restored her confidence and that of her community that her visions were not of a demonic nature. Indeed, her confessors and biographers, Fr. Pedro de Salmerón and Miguel Godínez, had the greatest respect for her.³⁰ As a result, Godínez and Salmerón each wrote biographies of the nun. Godínez also wrote that of her companion, Francisca de la Natividad. Even after he left Puebla for Mexico City he continued in correspondence with these two nuns.³¹

In some instances the attraction that confessors felt for their spiritual daughters was physical. Those have been discussed in Chapter 7. Others were attracted to the "gift" of grace perceived in spiritualized women. Since the sixteenth century, well-known men of the cloth in Spain and Spanish America had been drawn toward female mystics—secular or religious—trying to understand, verify, and support these women's abilities to communicate with Christ, his mother Mary, and saints and angels, by means of a supernatural aptitude.³² Assuming that the visionaries passed the acid test of the church and became well-known, their confessors enjoyed an advantageous opportunity to access fame by association. However, there is no denying that at the bottom of many of those relationships lay a strong affinity and also a deep belief and confidence in each other. Many a confessor was in awe facing those women, typically held as frail and unworthy vessels, who had an extraordinary ability for intellectual work, mortification of the flesh, long devotional practices and, above all, the facility to experience visionary episodes. Sor Melchora de la Asunción, a Pueblan Carmelite, was reputed to have one of the finest intellects in her convent. Called "one of the finest diamonds born in the Americas" by Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, he narrates how Fr. Andrés de Valencia, one among the several theologians who talked to her, declared that after a visit with Sor Melchora he "was all confused." "I thought to find a woman and I have found hidden in her the light of a Saint Thomas."³³

A similar feeling of confusion, born out of initial disbelief, filled Fr. Joseph Gómez, cited above, confessor of Antonia de San Jacinto. He was wary of making a mistake in his judgment of the nun's spiritual gifts, but he was so carried away by his admiration that he requested her cilicios from her to have them close to him as relics and share them with other friars who hoped to receive special benefits from them. This amounted to veneration in life and was not a practice encouraged by the church, but piety of this kind was not unusual in a century of deep religious beliefs. Fr. Joseph would spend most of his confessional hours with her, eschewing others who were considered "common" by him. He was not the only one to be impressed by Sor Antonia. Fr. Antonio Linaza, founder of a missionary school in Spain, met her and confessed his admiration for the way she conducted herself in religion. Her example could put men of the cloth to shame.³⁴

Biographies of nuns are no less important in disclosing the affective ties underlying the spiritual relationship between nun and confessor. Pedro Joseph Cesati, S. J. confessor to María Nicolasa de los Dolores, of the convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla, was moved to write a short biography of the nun after her death, which he dedicated to the abbess of the convent to serve as a model of edification for the community. Using notes sent to him by the nun and his own close knowledge of her throughout her short life as a religious, he portrayed her faith and many religious virtues with sincere admiration and true empathy.³⁵ Father Miguel Ramón Pinilla was similarly moved to write a biography of Sor María Antonia del Espíritu Santo Maldonado, of the convent of Santa Clara in Querétaro. His brief biography is devoid of any baroque mannerism and, like Cesati's, it was possibly written shortly after her death in 1783. Pinilla followed the typical scheme of building upon a childhood predestined to achieving a degree of spiritual bliss. Surrounded by piety in her own family, María Antonia and her sister aspired to profess. They learned how to play the double bass and the organ to gain admittance to the convent. As poor nuns in the wealthy Santa Clara convent their lives had their share of humiliations. Sor Antonia and Father Pinilla established a strong

bond as confessor and spiritual daughter. Her visions of Heaven and her affective relationship with the Lord were shared with and approved by him. As they had previously agreed, he was by her bedside and helped her to die in expectation of “the eternal kiss.”³⁶ After her death, wishing to let others know about the gifts of his spiritual daughter, he wrote a short biography, in which he included excerpts of the letters they had exchanged throughout time. In this he was no different from many other men who acknowledged that women could get not only the ear of the Lord but become his interlocutor, an ability denied to most men of the cloth. The last paragraph of the biography is transparent about his own faith in her fate: “and she expired in peace, her soul flying to her Motherland [Heaven]; this little peaceful dove, having torn the veil of mortality, which she had so much desired, left to enjoy the eternal kiss, among the virgins, accompanied by the Lord, my Lord, and her holy patrons, as I believe in the promises that the Lord made to her, and in her virtue and sanctity. Amen.” The affective and spiritual dependence of Father Padilla and Sor María, like that of Father Cesati and Anna María de San Joseph, was mutual despite the fact that, officially, authority had rested in the male hands.

The ties established by nuns and their confessors or prelates are also detected in the letters exchanged between them. Some nuns were prolific letter writers. They had to write notes or letters to their prelates for many reasons, most of them of an administrative nature. Less common were those in which a regular epistolary exchange revealed communication of a personal character. The administrative letters cover a variety of subjects, from requests to carry out economic transactions to reports of internal problems. Challenges to episcopal authority in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced spirited epistolary exchanges, as most recently studied in depth by Margaret Chowning.³⁷ Personal letters between confessors and nuns have been harder to find and they are often subsumed into biographies or dressed up as apuntes or cuadernos, the reports that nuns regularly sent to their confessors, which may have been understood as “letters.”³⁸ Unfortunately, letters are easily cast aside and lost. Scattered among administrative documents, they remain a difficult source to find and study.³⁹

WRITING: NUNS AS OBJECTS AND SUBJECTS

Given the close relationship of nuns and confessors, the issue of authorial provenance is central in discussing conventual writings. Writings associated with nuns had two main channels of expression: those penned by the women themselves and those written by men. Among the former were the diaries of their spiritual experiences, poetry, plays, historical accounts of their institutions, and biographies of other nuns. Among the latter are the Lives or Vidas of nuns written by confessors or other religious writers, an assignment which most of the time emanated from a prelate. The Vidas were part of a more extensive ecclesiastic historiographical effort that developed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁰ For example, the lives of two exemplary Augustinian nuns, educated in Puebla in the school of Santa Teresa for girls and professing in the convent of the Order in Oaxaca, were written by order of their prelate and filed in the archives of the convents as edifying reading for the sisters. This anonymous and unpublished status was the fate of some of these writings.⁴¹ When Fr. Félix de Jesús María wrote the biography of Sor María de Jesús Tomellín, of the convent of La Concepción in Puebla, in the mid-eighteenth century, he stated that there were thirty nuns in the convent at the beginning of the seventeenth century about “whose most holy lives Mother Josepha de la Concepción wrote, a truthful and elegant historian of the most illustrious ones, whose admirable examples of perfection have ennobled that religious cloister.”⁴² Religious women were not excluded from the collective memory of the church or New Spain, but how they were included is critical in understanding the process of memory building among men and women of the cloth. The historical effort to legitimize the role of the church in the forging of a “new” Spain in the Indies would include nuns because they were regarded as embodying the grace that Christ granted to the humble and simple. It also owed something to the growing importance of Mary in Counter-Reformation history, and the fast rise of Teresa of Avila to beatification and sainthood. Teresa, and a host of religious writers in seventeenth-century Spain, earned professed women a significant degree of respect. As daughters of Mary and brides of Christ, nuns were a presence difficult to ignore.⁴³ While not all the histories of male religious Orders with female branches included women, some did, and in such cases the writers were men. It was not diminishing for a man to write about women. In fact, this was an activity that throughout the seventeenth century men monopolized themselves, albeit using women as their resources.

Among the best-known seventeenth-century chroniclers or historians of religious Orders including women, or historians of specific female convents, were Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, author of *Parayso Occidental*, a history of the convents of Jesús María in Mexico City, and the first Carmelite convent of San José; Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios and José Gómez de la Parra, chroniclers of the Carmelite Order in Mexico City and Puebla; Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, historian of the Franciscan Order; and Fr. Alonso Franco, chronicler of the Dominican Order.⁴⁴ The works of these historians served both devotional and political needs. As Elías Trabulse states, religious chronicles helped to create a Mexican identity inasmuch as they were the testimony of a new people and new endeavors different from those of Spain.⁴⁵ Kathleen Ross has also stressed the growing sense of Novohispanic identity in Sigüenza y Góngora’s discourse as he wrote *Parayso Occidental*.⁴⁶ On the occasion of the centennial of the foundation of the disclced Carmelites of Puebla in 1704, José Gómez de la Parra, a clergyman and member of the Cathedral Church, undertook the writing of the convent’s history based on its carefully preserved archives, previous chronicles of the convent, and nuns’ own writings. After his death, his work was continued, although not finished, by his nephew José Martínez de la Parra. The procedure followed in all these cases was common practice in the seventeenth century. The biographer, preacher, or historian solicited papers and oral information from female convents in order to write their chronicles. This is what Sigüenza y Góngora did with the papers of Jesús María. In Parra’s case, the abbess of the Pueblan Carmelites, Sor María de Cristo, lent him her unconditional support for using the archives and her own oral memory of the sisters’ lives. Gómez de la Parra wrote that he was struck by the “marvels” he found in the convent, and the final product is as useful for factual information as it is for understanding the intellectual relationship between male writers and the nuns who either wrote for them, or provided them with the raw materials for their works.⁴⁷

Vetancurt and Franco, chroniclers of the Franciscan and Dominican nuns, shared the same belief in building the spiritual reputation of their Orders’ patrimony, and understood that women were part of it. In their chronicles they eulogized nuns as unblemished models of dedicated womanhood, notable for their innumerable virtues: strict observance of their Order’s Rules, sincerity and efficacy of their prayers, physical mortifications and fasts, self-control and humility, love and charity toward each other, rigorous enclosure, unsurpassed obedience, and commendable poverty. Even in the terse accounts of nuns who received only a few biographical lines, the chroniclers stretched the formula of praise as a lasting form of personal homage.

These were constructed narratives, not necessarily a true mirror of reality. Nuns were intentionally portrayed as women strong in their determination and faith, a characterization that ran contrary to the weakness of character attributed to most lay women in that century. The eulogy of strength has received little attention from commentators, especially since there is no parallel discourse of strong female characters in New Spain. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, Franco, and Vetancurt represented nuns as “super women” in deed and spirit. Their tenacious resistance to the adversities of life, as well as the intensity of their piety, was patently above those of most common women and comparable to “manly” attributes. This virile quality also applied to those endowed with intellectual talent.⁴⁸ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was called *rara avis* by one of her contemporaries, who added a sly comment on European nuns by saying that such rare birds could only be possible in the New World, because the Old could not compete with what she

wrote.⁴⁹ Regardless of their strength and their presumed “virile” attributes, the nuns’ femininity was also constantly underlined by their willing surrender to their beloved groom. It was important to maintain a complementary balance between the expected passive feminine and the uncommonly strong, or “masculine role.” Love and submission to their divine husband were also didactic messages, sublimated by religion and faith, which would serve as models to all lay women. In their final role as brides of Christ these strong but still feminine women remained praiseworthy and laudable members of their gender, confirming the natural relationship between the sexes.⁵⁰

All the works authored by men depended to a large extent on historical materials provided by the nuns, but they also had personal accounts from the confessors who, occasionally, allowed them to see the writings of nuns in their possession, or broke their vow of secrecy to eulogize their spiritual daughters.⁵¹ Sigüenza y Góngora and Gómez de la Parra were interested in the convents as much as in their inhabitants and wrote full accounts of foundations, patrons, expenses of construction, altars, and so forth, in addition to the personal lives of the nuns they chose to use as models. Franco and Vetancurt focused on the biographies only, in some instances rather minimally, and did not account fully for their sources, although they used the archives of the female convents of their Orders. Individual biographers such as Francisco Pardo, who wrote on Conceptionist María de Jesús Tomellín, used similar research techniques. The fact that nuns wrote biographies and historical chronicles was not hidden by the men who used them as sources, but they never questioned their own authority to write the published opus. In fact, Sigüenza y Góngora explained his own intellectual position throughout *Parayso Occidental* as that of a patriarchal figure who would refine and manipulate the nuns’ writings to best serve his interests as a writer and historian. He would amend the texts provided by the nuns, quote them verbatim, or rewrite them, as his judgment saw fit.⁵²

Opinions on the meaning of men’s borrowing of women’s works, and the significance of the women’s texts themselves, vary among the literary critics. Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau have interpreted women’s writings as an act of defiance, while Jean Franco is of the opinion that by taking the voice of God in an act of self-effacement heavily laced with the irrationality of faith, women did not gain any power for themselves.⁵³ Both sides have a measure of truth, but a closer examination of these texts give us pause to think of ways to add nuances to these positions. Kristine Ibsen’s analysis of the spiritual autobiographies of several Spanish American nun-writers assumes that they adopted strategies to suit their readers, who were representatives of the dominant culture, while at the same time were able to assert their own identities.⁵⁴ Myers notes how male authors manipulated women’s writings and how gender affected the ability of women—negatively—to express themselves freely, while men enjoyed autonomy in their choices.⁵⁵ My own position, reflecting a historical vision, is to consider these writings above all as mirrors of a period’s mentality expressed in an individual manner, and resulting from the person’s participation in the cultural elements that shaped her gender and class. The personality of each author is the most important element in each work. In what follows I will review only a few writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to pursue the themes of hidden or acknowledged protagonism—and the representation of self within one’s own community and time.

WRITING HISTORY IN THE CONVENT

Seventeenth-century nuns were silent sources of data but their silence was not their choice: it was imposed by the men surrounding them. They were quite conscious of their roles as keepers of their own memory.⁵⁶ The Carmelites shone in the task of writing cuadernos, or books where they narrated the biographies of other nuns. Among the first to record her life and the history of the foundation of the Carmelites in Mexico City was Sor Mariana de la Encarnación, whose lucid and detailed narrative on the travails she and Sor Inés de la Cruz experienced in their desire to found the convent were used extensively by Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios and Gómez de la Parra.⁵⁷

In *Fundación y primero siglo*, José Gómez de la Parra informs us about the women who helped him in his writing task. He accounts for at least eleven “*cronistas*” or nun-writers who passed written or oral information to him on the notable nuns and even on one of their chaplains. Some of them had begun to write at the instance of Miguel Godínez, who had been their spiritual director.⁵⁸ At the time of Gómez de la Parra’s writing (early eighteenth century), Abbess María de Cristo was his most helpful assistant and collaborator, sending him the historical accounts of the founders and first generation nuns, as well as many other archival documents. While he mentioned their names and their writings, Gómez de la Parra barely acknowledged their intellectual work. He praised all of them for their religious virtues and in some instances even for their needlework, but gave them no credit for the fact that they had been exercising their writing quills for nearly one century. His predecessor, Agustín de la Madre de Dios, who wrote in the mid-seventeenth century, was more interested in the nuns’ miracles and visions than in recording their intellectual talents, although once in a while he commented on the gifts of some, or casually dropped the name of an informant or writer. He borrowed liberally from Sor Mariana de la Encarnación’s account of her life and the foundation of Mexico City’s Carmelites. In passing, he commented on Melchora de la Asunción, “who was the abbess we have mentioned,” and the one “who left us, in writing, the happenings of this house.” Although he recognized her talent and compared her intellectual abilities to a diamond, he never gave precise information about her talent.⁵⁹ Neither in the mid-seventeenth century nor in the early eighteenth century did the role of nuns as historians of their Order receive public approval. In the case of the Carmelites of Puebla, the nuns themselves chose to delegate the task of writing on the centennial of their foundation to a man, as he would have the approval of the male hierarchy. They may have felt insecure about their “ability” to do the grand synthesis. Dedicating several sisters to gathering information as archivists was different from assigning to one the task of writer. The latter post never existed among the occupations for female convents. To be fair, the many demands of their observance could hardly have spared them the time to write chronicles. The complaints of diary and letter writers were partly due to having to share this occupation with many others as well as with their obligatory prayers. However, nuns did not lack a desire to remember collectively or personally. In either case that desire was based on a strong will to invest in the preservation of their tradition and their identity.

In a recent study, Rosalva Loreto has analyzed the writing of Francisca de la Natividad, who professed in the Pueblan Carmelite convent in 1609.⁶⁰ Miguel Godínez, spiritual director of some notable nuns of the early seventeenth century, assigned Francisca de la Natividad to be the cell companion of Isabel de la Encarnación and in charge of writing her life. He also assigned a similar cell companion to María de Jesús Tomellín, a Conceptionist nun destined to be the frustrated aspirant to beatification for nearly a century.⁶¹ As Loreto reveals, the writings of Francisca de la Natividad were extensively used by Pedro Salmerón, a biographer of Sor Isabel, as well as by Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios and Miguel Godínez. She points out how Francisca de la Natividad experienced an evolution as she wrote Isabel’s biography and began to write her own autobiography, thus recovering her own voice. Writing about another nun allowed her to see herself in the mirror of religion and to gain confidence to become the subject of her own writing. Whenever we compare the writings of nuns, who provided the foundational knowledge of their Order and their sisters to those of male chroniclers, we realize how much the men owed to these women. Inés de la Cruz and Mariana de la Encarnación wrote in a straightforward, clear style without self-consciousness about their roles. Mariana de la Encarnación offered her work to the glory of God but counted on an excellent memory to furnish her community with a record of its own. The transformation of anonymous entities into subjects of their own narratives is a process that applies to all the autobiographical works of nuns who began writing as a duty and eventually made a habit of their own introspection.

The fruits of the subjectivity developed in the seventeenth century were reaped in the following century. In the eighteenth century the anonymity of the female chronicler writers was finally broken with the publication of several works of historical character. Not only did some nuns write historical accounts, but they were printed under their names, breaking away from the male writers. In 1734, Sor María Teresa, presumably a Pueblan Capuchin nun, wrote a biography of the founder, Leocadia González Aranzamendi.⁶² Presented in the form of a “letter” to the community, it followed the style of other biographical works written by men, adopting the male mantle of the epistolary genre. Eulogizing the good upbringing and the numerous personal and religious virtues of the founder, the writer followed the traditional didactic objective of the biography. Sor María Teresa was an educated woman who could quote in Latin, make references to biblical sources, and even finish the work with an elegiac poem. There is nothing specifically feminine in her style or purpose. Her work followed the canons of her time and, in style, is indistinguishable from that of a man. Yet, coming from a sister in religion, it has the warmth admiration, and empathy of one who had herself experienced the rigors of her chosen Order.

Shortly thereafter, in 1755, Sor Joaquina María de Zavaleta, Abbess of the Mexico City Capuchin convent of San Felipe de Jesús, published the biography of the founder, Agustina Nicolasa María de los Dolores Muñoz y Sandoval.⁶³ Unlike the Carmelites earlier in the century, the Capuchins did not call on any male writer to perform this task. Sor Joaquina María underlines Sor Agustina’s sacrifice as she exchanged her wealth as a member of a rich family for the cell of the poor Clares. She focused, among many other good qualities, on her exemplary virtues: faith, hope, charity, gift of prayer, and devotion to the Passion of Christ and Mary as the suffering mother (*Mater Dolorosa*). Sor Joaquina María also followed closely accepted historical canons in developing her subject. Interestingly, she confirms Sor Agustina’s activities as a consummate letter writer who used her correspondence to coax donations from patrons, a technique practiced by many nuns before and after her. Sor Agustina also wrote over sixty letters to the city’s prelates, asking for prayers to be delivered after her death, and some notes referred to as “*apuntes*” (notes), cited by Joaquina María as a source of many of her verbatim quotes. These were probably an account of her spiritual life. Thus, this writer revealed and confirmed the epistolary and literary abilities of another nun, whose work may be lost. By the mid-eighteenth century there was no further chronicle-writing for any of the major religious orders in central Mexico, and these historical exercises by nuns began to take their place and supply the need for their own historical memory.⁶⁴

While the publication of biographical writing remained exceptional among women writers, there was an evolution toward writing works of more ambitious nature. Two works illustrate this trend. One is the history of the foundation of the Order of Mary, known as La Enseñanza, written as a community project by the nuns of the Order in Mexico, and printed for public reading near the end of the century.⁶⁵ Another is the history of the voyage of the founders, and the foundation of the convent of Saint Bridget, a new Order in Mexico, that remained unpublished until recently.⁶⁶ The latter is a chronological account by several hands of the travel from Spain to Mexico, the nuns’ sojourn in the convent of Regina Coeli, and the celebrations that accompanied the foundation. The published parts of this account reveal the experience of women to whom the New World’s landscapes, peoples, and social customs were totally alien. However, the narrative is competently written and a very useful account of the conventual and social etiquette of the period as well as of the understanding of their mission by the founders.

The history of La Enseñanza, on the other hand, is more Mexican in its outlook and provenance. It is prefaced with the usual polite disclaimers of the writer’s “lack of letters” contradicted by the statement that they had decided to do it regardless of the handicap of their sex. The gratitude of the daughters to the founder was the sentiment moving them, a significant gender note impossible for a male writer, although they claimed to have engaged in this task because they lacked a person of polished talent to assume it. The metaphorical birth of the convent and the mothering role of Sor María Ignacia are underlying themes in this narrative. The solidarity that moved nuns of earlier centuries to write about their mentors is finally openly expressed here. Removed by thirty-nine years from the convent’s foundation, this second generation of La Enseñanza nuns underscored the problem of being born “*indianas*”—daughters of the West Indies—and therefore subject to more suspicion in their intentions among the ecclesiastic authorities. The fact that the founder, María Ignacia Azlor y Echeveres, belonged to a titled Mexican family helped her to accomplish this foundation, despite some economic problems with the executor of her family’s wealth.⁶⁷ This account combines the story of the foundation with the praises of the religious virtues of the founder. In this the writers followed a traditional format for chronicle writing; however, there is a total absence of religious imagery and visionary testimonies. Under the winds of the Enlightenment historiography was moving away from older canons. This trend seems to be corroborated by the narrative of the foundation of a Carmelite convent in Querétaro, written in 1803 and continued ten years later with news of that period. Josefina Muriel has published excerpts of what appears to be the last chronicle in the colonial period, written by a woman. As we are told, Sor María Barbara de la Concepción, the convent’s founder, was also a prolific letter writer who used her ability to promote the foundation and defend its interests in the first decades of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Throughout the eighteenth century, nuns gained confidence in their ability to write their own history. Their style of writing is competent and devoid of the usual imaginative excesses of the seventeenth-century male chroniclers. These women did not have to prove their intellectual competence, only their resolve to satisfy their need for gaining a historical identity.

THEATER AS DIDACTIC RECREATION

If the writing of conventual history and didactic prose remains to be studied in depth, that of the theatrical production of nuns is also in need of being recovered from its dusty shelves. Starting in the late sixteenth century, Mexican nuns began to seek some aesthetic recreation in the performance of music in the convents. Women with musical abilities were accepted as nuns to perform for conventual masses. In the mid-seventeenth century, the *cantoras* or singers received a special bonus yearly in Easter Week.⁶⁹ The transition from music to performances within the cloister proves difficult to document, but the prohibition of comedies in the cloisters is a clue that, since the beginning of the seventeenth century, there may have been some theatrical performances in the churches of women’s convents in Mexico and in Puebla. Phillip III charged Archbishop Juan Pérez de la Cerna to prohibit performances in which nuns were the actors, while in Puebla, Bishop Palafox was aware of a comedy performed in a convent by professional actors.⁷⁰ In his 1647 visit to the convent of Jesús María in Mexico, Archbishop Fr. Payo de Ribera addressed the issue of reading and performing comedies, prohibiting them in no uncertain terms. Such activities ran against the modesty (*recato*) of the religious state.⁷¹ It is well known that Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz wrote a number of religious and lay theatrical pieces; but as far as we know, they were not performed in the convent, but in private homes or in the viceregal palace.⁷²

Two short theatrical pieces stand as examples of the types of performances that took place *within* women’s cloisters. The first one was written for the Franciscan Capuchin convent of Mexico City to be performed on Christmas Eve. While the birth of Christ is the conjunctural event, its true intention was to “demonstrate their gratitude” to Cayetano Antonio de Torres, their chaplain.⁷³ Torres had written a treatise for the spiritual direction of the novices and he must have been a trusted and loved confessor to the community.⁷⁴ The title of the piece is *La Virtud Agradecida* (Grateful Virtue), and it is thirteen double pages long, numbered only on the recto side of the pages. The manuscript is undated and anonymous, but it was probably written in the middle of the eighteenth century, since at one point there is a reference to Juan José Eguira y Eguren (1696–1763), a notable erudite, appointed Bishop

of Yucatan in 1752. The lack of authorial ascription raises the issue of whether this piece was written by a nun or was written for them to perform. I am inclined to the former assumption. Another issue is whether the nuns “performed” in the piece or whether actors were contracted for that purpose. Since seventeenth-century prelates remonstrated against nuns dressed for performances within the cloisters, it is possible that the nuns were indeed the actors, but these two issues may never be corroborated.

In *La Virtud Agradecida* the allegorical persons are Good Counsel (*Buen Consejo*), Suspicion (*Recelo*), a Perturbed Soul (*Alma Conturbada*), and a Tormented Soul (*Alma Atormentada*). A notation for “music” indicates a role for “Music,” and the playing of music in a couple of instances. Music appears first and explains to the audience of “loving brides” that there is already guidance for those who seek Christ and fear losing him. There was an indication that there were on the stage two towers capable of hiding a person from the audience, which were covered by cloth until “the appropriate time.” Thus, there is a sense of “theatricality” in this clear allegorical reference to the chaplain’s surname, Torres. Perturbed Soul appears dressed in black, and represents the soul who has not yet found full consolation in the divine groom’s love. She has professed as an austere Capuchin and has given up everything for him, but he eludes her. Tormented Soul, dressed in red, is also distressed because Jesus calls her with sweet words but puts so many obstacles in her way that she dares him to either let her reach him or let her die. Despair and passion are thus symbolically expressed in black and red. They are soul sisters, but Tormented Soul hopes to see a new day, while Perturbed Soul feels hopeless, suggesting a deeper degree of suffering.

At that point Good Counsel, dressed in white, the color of purity, appears and advises the souls to stop reaching conclusions on their own before consulting him. The souls are willing to take advice from Good Counsel, who addresses them to meet him by the “towers.” The souls explain their feelings to the towers, as in confession. Perturbed Soul has problems with prayer, doubtless caused by the Devil. She suffers from the usual self-doubts that appear so frequently in the spiritual letters written by nuns. Tormented Soul wishes to fast and to accomplish other pious deeds, but always stops short of her wishes. Good Counsel advises the first soul that God engages the soul in prayer as a soldier would engage in a battle, and she should persevere. A soldier who fights for his “King” [in this case God] must expect to fight against the Devil. Tormented Soul is told that God is not always available to resolve her problems, but her troubles are of his making. Suspicion, dressed in purple, a “disturbing” color, enters on stage and introduces the possibility that the Holy Office may have something to do with the Capuchin convent. She is surprised to see two recently professed nuns aspiring to achieve the wisdom that only the mature saints have. There is remonstrance in her words. The observance of their Rules is all they need, she states, calling attention to the lack of confidence of some souls in the “towers.” Suspicion pretends not to understand the situation, wondering what is the use of those “towers.” This figure is created to introduce a rhetorical counterdiscourse that calls for a rebuttal. As expected, Good Counsel returns from behind the towers and challenges Suspicion to stop her trend of thought. Suspicion gives in quickly and bends her knee before Good Counsel, begging for “enlightenment.” Good Counsel explains that the celebration taking place is in honor of the birth of the Savior, and as an expression of gratitude to the wise and learned Torres, whose praise then she proceeds to sing. Torres the chaplain is a learned theologian, who deserves not just the “miter” of Mexico—the title of archbishop—but that of pope, were the “Indies” not so far removed from Rome. This is an obvious exaggeration of praise. Suspicion agrees that the Capuchin souls can live without her, as long as they are guided by Torres. The two souls advise their sisters to find consolation in obeying their chaplain, whose guidance they hope to enjoy forever.

This allegory addressed the spiritual troubles experienced by some nuns and pointed to the straight path to be found in the counsel of their wise chaplain and confessor. It is charmingly written, patently didactic in its intention, and openly adulatory. Whoever wrote this piece knew about the problems caused nuns by their confessors, but it could not have been Torres himself, given the adulation showered on him. Interestingly, at the end of the piece an Indian appears with a pillow under his arms. He speaks in imperfect Spanish and his figure was obviously meant to be a “humorous” ending for the amusement of the audience. Lacking Torres to advise him, he finds consolation for his doubts in his pillow. He makes a will of his few belongings to some of the nuns and then bids them goodbye, hoping to see them again in Heaven. Bringing this figure into the play suggests that the Indian and his speech were still used for mirth, a semi-unredeemed “other” outside the cloisters, brought in as comic relief.⁷⁵

Another theatrical piece, to be performed in the celebration of a profession, was a Colloquy (*Coloquio*) composed by María Vicenta de la Encarnación for the profession of her student novice María de San Eliseo in 1804. They were both Carmelites in the convent of Santa Teresa, la Antigua, in Mexico City.⁷⁶ This play was written for a special but private occasion and we have no information on whether it was ever performed in any other convent. The writer wished to introduce the spiritual elements that would help the novice in her probation, as well as the adversities that would face her in her apprenticeship. The characters are Patience, the Devil, Vocation, Constancy, Perseverance, the World, the Flesh, Religion, the Bride, and the Groom. While voices outside praise a victory over the world (the final profession of a novice), Patience and Constance wonder who has achieved it, given that there is so much suffering in life. The Bride, who has just arrived in the convent, is restless. She calls for her Groom but does not find him as yet. The Devil enters, and feeling challenged by the novice, a young woman who defies his empire, calls for his aides to conquer her. The novice begs her Groom for help in this confrontation and he promises it, ordering Vocation to accompany her. However, he also gives the Devil permission to test her. A battle of arguments for either side ensues, with the Bride being assailed by the world and urged by Perseverance and Vocation to stand on her resolution to profess. Religion plays a strong role by telling the novice about Mary, who has chosen her for religion. Persuaded, the novice follows her and binds herself to seek her Groom regardless of any hardship. The Groom advises the nun about his own nature. He is jealous and will not tolerate sharing his love with anyone else.

Under attack from the Devil and the Flesh, the novice has moments of weakness in which she wants to abandon the convent and its rigorous discipline. Perseverance, Patience, and Religion help her to adhere to her decision. The second part of the play is the final profession. While Demon and World continue to assail her, the novice fights back and the Lord eventually comes to her rescue, accepting her as his Bride. He praises her beauty and promises to relieve her from her weariness after that final and happy day of her profession.

This is a fully developed play showing maturity and expertise both in the writing and in the symbolic meaning of the characters as part of conventual life. Sor María Vicenta de la Encarnación was a talented nun with a good insight of the trials of the novitiate, the testing period for so many alleged vocations. While the personal will of the novice is central to the play, as it was in real life, the script underscores the several moral elements to which all aspiring nuns resorted to achieve their goal. Adversities on the path were understood as part of the will of God, but in the end he would rescue his bride, already tested and resolute in her final decision. These two examples of theater within the convent suggest the deployment of writing as a tool for two ends: to release the creativity of the writer as well as to furnish exemplary literature to mold the characters of the professed. Performance as a form of indoctrination, a common device for conversion among the indigenous in the sixteenth century, gained a place in the convents as a legitimate tool for the judicious entertainment of the brides of Christ. The understated mothering role of the writer of the *Coloquio* is also evident. Only a true feeling of nurturing would have moved Sor María Vicenta to write this piece, not only for her students but for other novices to come. The play is an open acknowledgment of the closeness that teacher and novice expected to develop throughout the year of probation. While in many instances this relationship was far from perfect or did not even develop, as we have seen in Chapter 2, in others it matured, creating rewarding bonds.

INTIMATE WRITINGS: DIARIES OF THE SOUL

The writings demanded by confessors from spiritually gifted nuns form a corpus that, albeit small, is of considerable cultural and literary importance. Many of them must have been lost and we only know a handful of them, possibly written at night or in the odd moments of rest they enjoyed during the day. These works have already received the attention of several literary critics, and doubtless they will continue to command attention in the future, owing to their intrinsic value as keys for understanding a period, a gender, and a worldview that merits further study. Hardly any other type of writing reveals in such depth the intimate world of the writer, which in itself is a disclosure of the set of intellectual, religious, and affective formulations that guided her life. Reflecting personal and social constructs, these writings give us a key to the culture of the convent and religion in the colonial period. Here I can only review several examples suggestive of the variety of these means of expression. They are the writings of Mother María Magdalena Lorravaquio, Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Sor María Marcela Soria, and Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio.⁷⁷ As a group, they were visionaries following the spiritual trend of Teresa of Avila and seventeenth-century Spanish spirituality. They all aspired to experience the ultimate unitive state with God as a sign of the true marriage between the bride of Christ and her holy husband, and wrote to explain the complexity of an inner world in which faith battled with human shortcomings. However, they expressed those yearnings in distinctly different ways.⁷⁸

Mother María Magdalena Lorravaquio's writings are emblematic of early-seventeenth-century religiosity and faith. She was a visionary but not a true mystic. Visionaries, led by their faith, experienced ecstasies, but the predominant feature of their spiritual lives was visual experiences through which they made contact with divine beings, describing them in vivid terms that related easily to the physical world. During these contacts they pleaded for their own souls and those of others or begged for a clearer understanding of God's message. In addition to bearing witness to the majesty of the Christian God, they forged for themselves a space of authority with their ability to see beyond the physical world. While the recognition of that authority had to wait for the approval of the male ecclesiastic hierarchy, it was acknowledged at the local level by sisters in religion, confessors and relatives, as well as the local community.

Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio wrote about having sometimes experienced the unitive state, but most of her writing consists in the description of her visions.⁷⁹ She professed in San Jerónimo, Mexico City, in 1590, and began to write, obeying the command of her two Jesuit confessors. Her manuscript was copied by an expert hand in 1650 with the permission of her nephew Francisco Lorravaquio, a priest in Tampamón and Commissary of the Holy Office. Little is known about her early life except that she was fond of reading saints' lives and dreamed of escaping to a desert like the ancient hermits. Lacking the desert she began a plan of fasting and self-mortification (*disciplinas*). Mother Lorravaquio suffered from a long-term ailment, and much of her life in the convent was spent as a semi-invalid who received friends in her cell, acted as a teacher for servants, and attended communal prayers whenever she could.

Her eighty-one-page manuscript is divided into three parts. In the first one she narrates her childhood and writes about her ailments. In the second part she tells the reader how her visions raised the issue of orthodoxy among the Inquisitors, and how she was examined by several theologians to corroborate that she was not a misguided nun. In the third part she describes her prayers and visionary experiences. Her physical disability and confinement to her cell encouraged her didactic abilities, but she also spent much of her time engaged in needlework and prayer. Her sickness was sublimated and explained as the opportunity to experience in her own body the sufferings of Christ. The influence of Luis de Granada on her piety is patent.⁸⁰ Granada, an authoritative theologian, would have a deep and lasting influence over conventual spirituality throughout the seventeenth century. He considered prayer a sublime food, a gift for the living, and a means of helping the dead. For Lorravaquio, prayer was the axis of her daily life. It was after engaging in prayer that she experienced her visions, which she understood as originating in the will of God and therefore to be totally orthodox. Prayer also implied a period of recollection (*recogimiento*) and contacts with the divine were only experienced after the soul wrapped itself in its own solitude. While she experienced many colloquies of a loving nature with God, we do not see any attempt on her part to explain them, but she recorded them carefully and appreciated the benefits that she perceived they provided her. Her contacts with divine beings, Jesus being the most frequent, began in "places" she described as solitary spaces, but were eventually filled with colorful memories of brilliant colors accompanied by tactile and olfactory impressions. They left her imbued with a deep sense of peace and understanding that perhaps explains why most of her book is dedicated to narrating them. Having learned how to read late in her youth, she was mostly influenced by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Like other visionaries, Lorravaquio found an inspirational source of consolation in her love of God, expressed with tender phrases copied from the amatory language of lay lovers, but this love was closely associated with the Passion of Christ, a key theme in seventeenth-century spirituality.

The heritage of seventeenth-century spiritual writers also left a strong influence on eighteenth-century figures such as Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad. She began her spiritual development as an intern in the Colegio de Belén, a retreat where willing girls could become beatas and aspire to profess as regular nuns.⁸¹ Because of her poverty she had numerous problems in finding a place to profess until she was finally admitted at San Juan de la Penitencia, where she eventually became a black-veiled nun at age thirty-seven. She had been admitted as a novice in the Indian convent of Corpus Christi, which she had to leave due to the protests of the Indian community, an incident that she remembered with embarrassment.⁸² Her fifty "letters" to her confessor concentrate on the state of her soul and are the sum of her known writings. Their value to the Franciscan Order is suggested by the fact that they were meticulously copied by several friars.⁸³ At the margins a scribe has classified the nature of the passages written by the nun, and written the appropriate descriptive virtue they could embody for a potential reader, such as "humility," "peace," "chastity," "charity," or "the providential presence of God and faith."⁸⁴ We do not know if Sor Sebastiana Josefa's writings circulated among Franciscan nuns or friars but, doubtless, they were used as potential grist for her pious biography. The annotations could have been made either by Fr. Ignacio Saldaña, who wrote her funeral sermon one year after her death, or José Eugenio Valdés, who wrote her biography.⁸⁵

Sor Sebastiana repeated the well-known rhetorical disclaimers of her incompetence and the lack of interest of her "vile" life, but like other nuns, she kept on writing.⁸⁶ She does not provide much information on the daily life of that institution except in a few passages. Perhaps the most notable is that of the many years she spent taking care of a sick religious.⁸⁷ The intensity of her spiritual life is portrayed in full baroque anguish. Alternating between states of despair and the heights of mystical union, Sor Sebastiana's inner life followed a complex path. Dryness and melancholy were followed by visions such as that in Letter Thirty-three, in which Christ took her heart in his hands. Her "spiritual visits" are obviously rooted in sixteenth-century mysticism, but her anguish is closer to baroque spirituality. In her many colloquies with her divine husband, the amorous twist so idiosyncratic of women's monastic spirituality is expressed in such phrases as: "You are the only desire of my soul and the true breath of my heart."⁸⁸ In Letter Thirty-eight she transcribed a series of her own affective poems that reveal a creative vein developed largely through her own self-taught acquaintance with devotional books and the lives of saints.⁸⁹ Extremely modest in its ambition and totally inspired by piety, such poetry was not expected to be published.

Her visions soften the otherwise harsh nature of her piety. One of her best descriptions of her mystic conversations is in her last letter when she describes how, after prayer, she found words to talk to Christ in one of her amorous dialogues in which they engaged:

my soul understood, with a force tender and loving that stirred my heart intensely; it burst with an ache so penetrating, painful and soft, that [I], totally helpless, was filled with a great desire and with abundance of tears, and talked with amorous words, so ardent and true, they rang with the deepest clarity, without sound and very differently from everything here; the style was so soft and well ordered in everything I said, that it could not have been thought; it happened with such ease, and I said all I felt in my soul, and asked for lofty things in great confidence, dejected and overcome in my lowliness, but with a great desire to yield and please such admirable beauty, Majesty, and greatness. I praised him greatly, knowing that only his most charitable and powerful kindness could have bestowed the innumerable benefits and so many blessings upon me, and suffer me . . . I was totally absorbed in my sweet lover God, source and comfort of all the bitterness of this life. I talked to him as if he was present, with great confidence and reverential love, wishing with all my heart for him to be loved and not to be offended [In the margin: “Love of God.”].

Finding her ability to speak to the Lord was a momentous experience for this and other nuns. The release of the tongue, so tied up by ecclesiastic orders, was a primary source of joyous achievement.

Kristine Ibsen underlines the penitential nature of Sor Sebastiana’s observance, a virtue also extolled by the two ecclesiastics who wrote on her life.⁹⁰ In the case of Sor Sebastiana, the intention was to annihilate “self” and “will,” being obsessed by her perceived inadequacy to rise to high levels of perfect behavior. To compensate she punished her body with self-laceration and food deprivation.⁹¹ She also spent long hours in prayer, focusing on her beloved groom and Mary, her model and protector.⁹² Sor Sebastiana was constantly awed by the beauty created in the world by the Lord and the Lord’s own beauty, as well as the love he bestows upon his creatures. Although she lived in a constant state of self-deprecation, she enjoyed colorful visions illuminated by splendorous light and the calming reassurance imparted by the presence of God and Mary. “Everything was most beautiful in that heavenly light (that I do not know how to express it because I am confused and do not find how to say this). The light was better than that of heaven, as a resplendent cloud, and there was His Divine Majesty, of sovereign beauty, and his most pure mother, my lady, my mother Mary, so beautiful and graceful, revealing glory and eliciting love and confidence.”⁹³ She also had visions of demons and insidious creatures who tormented her, but they are not comparable in profusion or horror to those attributed to some seventeenth-century nuns.⁹⁴ Doubtless, Sor Sebastiana’s complex inner world was idiosyncratic, and it points to a continuum of style and feeling unbroken by time and flowing from the seventeenth into the eighteenth century.

Sor María de Jesús Felipa also professed in San Juan de la Penitencia in Mexico City, which poses the intriguing possibility of identifying this convent as a center of spiritual writing. While this may be simply a coincidence, it still points to the liveliness of the cloisters as centers of writing. Her diary is dated 1758, one year after Sor Sebastiana’s death, and comprises the months of February through December.⁹⁵ While she complained about the obligation to write, she also acknowledged that the process of writing about her soul was enlightening and, at the same time, allowed her to suffer a form of self-mortification that put her closer to God without offending him.⁹⁶ Her visionary traits follow seventeenth-century trends, corroborating Ellen Gunnarsdottir’s observation that within the cloisters the reforming winds of the Enlightenment hardly affected many nuns’ piety. They continued to express themselves in the same intimate and affective style characteristic of the preceding century.⁹⁷ Despite being arranged by months, the message in Sor María de Jesús Felipa’s diary does not follow a chronological development in her spiritual life. Its contents are anecdotal with regard to her soul and the several incidents of conventual life that she recorded.⁹⁸ Her diary bears the marks of censorship by an unknown hand, possibly that of her confessor or maybe her own. Almost all personal names have been scratched out, making impossible the identification of most of her sisters in religion and other persons associated with the convent and with her. Even her identification as the writer was only possible because in several instances she explained the meaning of her name and her convent.

Sor María de Jesús Felipa was assailed by periods of spiritual “dryness” when her prayers yielded no understanding, inner light, or consolation. These were compensated for by visionary experiences that she began to enjoy halfway through the year and that became increasingly meaningful, injecting into her narrative a strong dose of authority and understanding of her role. These revelations led Sor María de Jesús Felipa into a number of mystic raptures described sometimes with a peculiar emphasis on sensual bliss, comforting to body and soul. “Such soft sightings, such sweet hearing, such penetrating smell, comforted all my nature; the enjoyment penetrated my very bones; and the feeling was as if my body were between delicate and soft linens.”⁹⁹ Following in the footsteps of Teresa of Ávila, Sor María constructed an interior “castle,” a series of chambers to which she retreated and from where she built a visionary landscape graced by garden metaphors, visits to Heaven, and spiritual “battles” that left her physically and spiritually exhausted. In this special locus she developed a polarizing struggle between her feelings of not deserving the love of God and yet learning that she was receiving it. This tension resolved itself when she retreated from the world. “Other times I feel a sadness that reminds me of that of the Apostles the night of the apprehension [of Christ] that obliged them to sleep while the Lord was agonizing in his prayer. I wish everything would be sleep, and when sleep overcomes me, my head heats up, I wish I could stay in a dark place and not communicate with anyone.”¹⁰⁰ Frequent communion, a healing device much resorted to among observant nuns, helped her to gain reassurance of the presence of God within.

She carried out an intense dialogue with her confessor, whose name is never revealed to us, but whose presence as her constant interlocutor is hard to forget. She suggests that he was apprehensive about her writings and scolded her, and it is possible that their sometimes tense relationship was due to his doubts about her orthodoxy.¹⁰¹ Her visions may have made him nervous. Sor María wrote about having extensive conversations with her guardian angels, who explained to her the nature of her own writing and that of other nuns, and encouraged her to continue writing. Lacking theological education, they explained to her that the writings of nuns ought to be simple, because their own naïveté proved that they were really inspired by God and not the Devil. In fact, God only put enough “lights” (i.e., enlightenment) in women for others to recognize in them what was his work.¹⁰² Since Sor María was writing these words for the consumption of her reader, it is arguable that she was simply using a rhetorical strategy to protect herself. She was perfectly aware of her own capabilities, but was masking them behind the words of higher entities that would result in “authorizing” her despite her pretended lack of abilities. This was a complex rhetorical game belied by the fact that in other passages she was far from being modest about her writings or herself. Beginning in June, she began to have visions of Heaven and engaged in long conversations with her Lord, who dealt with her not as an ignorant woman, but as someone full of wisdom and marked by his preference. Addressing her as “my bride,” and with other affectionate expressions, he told her that her writing was the means he used for his own relief, and that, by his appointment, she was the conduit for his word, as well as the protector of her

When the Lord explained to her that he was the source of her knowledge, he also told her that he conferred the same “doctrine,” that is the same language and the same grace, to his ministers and his brides.¹⁰⁴ This is a manifesto of equality in the genders. Accommodating her writing to the constant and present male authority, the nun makes a symbolic curtsy before proceeding in her writing, and recording the voice of a Lord who continues to buttress her destiny as a chosen soul. Sor María was definitely having a dialogue of “power” with her confessor as she wrote, for she knew he read everything she handed him. At one point she wrote: “Only God knows that the most distressing thing in this inner path is to deal with men, even saintly ones.”¹⁰⁵ This counterdiscourse suggests that she and other nuns played a complex game of hide-and-seek with the male authorities, apparently innocent but discreetly defiant. Even so, she knows she depends on her confessor to explain some of the meaning of her writings, and despite tensions, she continues to address him warmly and respectfully. While she reaffirmed her authority, the confessor continued to be a “safe port” for her, as he represented the authority of God. “I know that in obeying you I obey God himself.”¹⁰⁶ The understanding of God in the multiple roles of personal lover, father of an extended family, and king of his realm weaves a rich pattern in the fabric of Sor María de Jesús Felipa’s world and writing. Hers is yet another example of the many nuances possible to the expression of baroque faith.

Also in the mid-eighteenth century, but in the city of Querétaro, another writer began to develop her spiritual “closed garden.” She was Sor María Marcela Soria, a member of the Capuchin convent San José de Gracia about whose life we know only through her autobiographical diary. This work is divided in two sections. The first one comprises the story of her life as a child and a young woman, and her change from secular to religious. The second, a longer one, focuses on her life as a nun, and gives very little information on the daily routines of the convent, stressing her inner life and spiritual experiences. The recollection of her childhood and teen years in a rural estate in Maravatio are a well-crafted account of her life as a lay woman. Apart from María de San José’s accounts of her childhood and puberty, nothing compares to María Marcela’s story of her early years. Sor María de San José had known she wanted to be a nun since she was a child. María Marcela had no such thoughts. She enjoyed a pampered childhood surrounded by siblings and servants, and received the benefit of an education beyond “womanly arts” that encouraged her to read. The death of her mother, which she deeply felt, steered her into a new role as her father’s right hand in the management of the household. Despite these responsibilities, her vivacious character expressed itself in her love of clothes and parties.¹⁰⁷ She was on the brink of an arranged marriage with a young man of whom she approved when, as she tells us, he lost all his crops and, in financial distress, fled to Oaxaca. At that point she began to consider the possibility of going into a convent, stunned by the frailty of the world’s vanities. The seed of a conversion took some time to germinate, but when it did, she took the irrevocable decision against the will of her family. Kristine Ibsen points to a certain degree of “confabulation” in autobiographical narratives that recreate life incidents to readjust them to patterns easily understandable and evocative of the lives of other notable religious women of destiny, such as Teresa of Avila or Catherine of Sienna.¹⁰⁸ It is clear that the recollection of her youth was intended to serve higher spiritual ends, but the veracity of the many details of her daily life should not be questioned. Her confessor would not have permitted her to “invent” a life story.

Sor María Marcela’s account of her decision to enter the convent, not as a result of a predestined call but due to her disappointment over a frustrated wedding arrangement, points to a possibility that remains undeclared and uncorroborated for other women. Yet, as a nun, María Marcela must have held exemplary virtues among some admiring clergymen. An intriguing inquisitorial process of enquiry began in 1799 and ran through 1810, centering on an account of her life written by Joseph Ignacio de Cabrera. The process attempted to establish the canonical validity of some statements in his biography. Cabrera had become her confessor after a long period in which Sor María Marcela had eschewed all spiritual help. The Inquisition condemned several parts of his work and ordered the original manuscript and any existing copies to be collected from those holding them, to be deposited in its archives.¹⁰⁹ Since there are no available copies of this biography, one wonders what aspects of her spiritual life Cabrera may have chosen to extol: her observance and her excellence at prayer, her visions, or the clear and inspired prose she used to explain her mystical raptures. Cabrera and María Marcela are yet another example of the special spiritual relationships that generated writings on both parties. She was confident in writing about herself; he became an admirer of her special qualities and wished to eulogize her.¹¹⁰

María Marcela, the joy-seeking young secular, showed a remarkable degree of self-confidence and less self-deprecation than other nuns. She had no false modesty in praising her virtues. The last sixty-six pages of her work are a meticulous explanation of how she fulfilled all the virtues demanded from a Capuchin. This is not to say that she was constantly satisfied or happy with herself. For many years she opted not to have a confessor because she did not find enough understanding in those she had. She did not fare well spiritually during that period, but once she found better guidance, she exuded satisfaction in her observance of religious life. “In everything that happens to me I find comfort, joy and happiness, wishing to fulfill God’s will as do the blessed.”¹¹¹ Two of her sources of inspiration were Sor María de Agreda and the exercises of Saint Ignatius.¹¹² From them she derived an intense worship of Mary and the Passion of Christ. A significant section of her work is devoted to explaining the rhythm and contents of her praying activities, which furnishes an intimate and very personal view of the nuns’ elaborate forms of worship and prayer during the prescribed canonical hours.

Sor María Marcela had several states of mystical union and, as expected, she attempted to explain them, but confessed that “I took the pen with great wishes to explain myself, but they will remain unfulfilled because to attempt the impossible is folly. To attempt to understand the incomprehensible is reprehensible temerity; to explain myself is an impossible task.” “Love and charity are the only ways to explain the mercy of God.” Spiritual recollection and theocentrism are at the core of her mystical flights. “And it follows such an intimate union of God and the soul that I felt like being in a very tight embrace and an indissoluble tie; this was so firm and permanent, that I am persuaded that no amount of will could separate the soul from God or undo the tie.”¹¹³ Like other nuns, her privileged relationship with her divine groom makes her feel loved and favored, but at one point she also remarks how fulfilled she was by being of the same gender as Mary. In more than one way, the worship of Mary helped the nuns to overcome the gender inequalities intrinsic to the Roman Catholicism.¹¹⁴ María Marcela’s autobiography is, to me, one of the most accomplished efforts of an eighteenth-century nun to find herself both in her writing and her life.

DIDACTIC DEVOTIONAL WRITING

Yet another vein in the mines of women’s writings is devotional literature. This was not prompted by confessors but by their own faith and desire to share their piety with other nuns. Devotional literature implied a conscious act of authorship and with it, the assumption of responsibility for its contents as well as for its intentions. Although they had to be approved by the ecclesiastic authorities, in taking the initiative to write this kind of literature nuns assumed a pedagogical role to teach others about devotional practices. The assumption of that role was acquiesced to and even encouraged by the male hierarchy. Consciously or not, they were ceding authority to the women under their spiritual care. In fact, it was the recognition of their possessing not just knowledge of the canon, but the blessing of the Lord, who gave them lights to enunciate forms of worshiping him. In Chapter 3, I surveyed some examples of the devotional literature that circulated in manuscript form in the seventeenth century and those that were eventually printed in the eighteenth

century. They are mostly spiritual exercises to guide prayer and devotional acts, and which were popular because they injected a spirit of solidarity in faith.

This genre of didactic and devotional literature had a towering figure in the eighteenth century in Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, a learned Dominican nun whose many writings received the honor of being printed under the patronage of the Bishop of Puebla, Pantaleón Alvarez de Abreu.¹¹⁵ Sor María Anna had been a beata in Santa Rosa Viterbo, an institution that struggled for years to become a nunnery, finally succeeding in 1740. Her writings became so popular that she became a well-known and revered advisor in the city. Her funeral reached an apex of religious and popular emotional paroxysm.¹¹⁶

Sor María Anna was born into a family of comfortable means and piety. One of her sisters became a nun and a brother was a chaplain. In his older years, her father lived a devout life given to prayer and daily communions, inspiring his children with his example.¹¹⁷ After bankruptcy the family passed through years of scarcity. In fact, Sor María Anna grew up in poverty. A self-educated woman, she was an avid reader from her early years. Her readings, the basis of her intellectual development, consisted mostly in the lives of saints, Thomas A. Kempis, María la Antigua, and biblical sources. As a cloistered beata and as a nun she must have also read Thomas Aquinas and deepened her study of the Old and New Testaments. She could quote fluently in Latin, which she did not bother to translate for her readers, whom she expected to know the language and the sources. Sometime in her childhood her mother dedicated her to the Virgin Mary, which may explain the centrality of her Marian devotion. In the beaterio of Santa Rosa her training and abilities were used for administering the institution, and for many years she was in charge of the accounts and the administration.¹¹⁸

As the spiritual founder of the convent of Santa Rosa de Santa María, in Puebla, her first tasks were to write rules for its daily observance, which were printed in 1746.¹¹⁹ This was a “first” in Mexico. No other woman in Mexico had been authorized to write guidelines for observance of her community. This work pointed to her ability to order and guide the behavior of the newly minted nuns as well as their spirituality. Her intellectual production was far removed from the emotional intimacies and visionary traits of some of her own contemporaries, let alone those of the seventeenth century. Her interest and abiding passion was to write didactic literature, to guide her sisters in religion to true observance of their convent’s Rules, and to entice them to the deepest possible veneration of Christ and Mary. Considering that María Anna died in 1756 and that her first work was published in 1746, some of her writings must have been produced in her early years as a beata. Fr. Juan de Villaseñor, who preached a sermon in her memory, states that the treatise on the milk of Mary was written “in her youth.”¹²⁰ Whether or not that reference points to her years in the beaterio is unclear, but it is almost certain that all her works were written in the anonymity of her cell, until they were posthumously published in 1758. Her confessor, Joseph Bellido, took charge of writing her biography and publishing her main writings, all in one volume. His source of information for the biography must have been the *cuadernos* (copybooks) she regularly sent to him.¹²¹

Sor María Anna experienced some states of mystical ecstasies but she writes about them as an intellectual experience, and as a source of knowledge that validated her writing, since it was during these raptures that she learned from God through symbolic messages. For example, in one of them she saw a book that contained God’s knowledge and was also the book of her life. On another occasion she saw herself dead and understood that only in being dead to the world could one resist its demonic appeals.¹²² Fr. Juan de Villaseñor was more explicit about these visions, which she confided to him as her confessor and he mentioned in her funeral sermon.¹²³ In a measured indication of the source of her advice, Sor María Anna explained, in one of her works, *Medidas del Alma con Cristo*, how Christ appeared to her and taught her to interpret his words and rules of behavior for the faithful so that she could explain them in her writings.¹²⁴ She is always careful in stating that she “understood” the word of Christ, underlining the source and ascribing to herself the role of conduit of his message. Each sees in some of her writings a clearly defined role as guide of her readers, noting her restraint in not amplifying the supernatural nature of these communications.¹²⁵ In her works María Anna gives her reader a clearly written and eloquent exegesis of the lives of Christ and Mary, as well as a well-traced road map to overcome the many obstacles humans may expect in their path to find God. She is not interested in communicating states of mysticism as experienced personally, but in helping others to achieve perfection, a pragmatic objective more in tune with her role as teacher.

The essence of her works was not mystic but devotional. The titles of her works indicate their nature and purpose: *Oratorio espiritual* (Spiritual Oratory), *Meditaciones de la Sagrada Pasión* (Meditations on the Sacred Passion), *Leyes de Amor Divino* (Laws of Divine Law), addressed to the brides of Christ, *Mysterios del Santísimo Rosario* (the Mysteries of the Sacred Rosary), and so on. Some of these works were divided into publishable “pocket books” for devotional purposes and were republished in subsequent years for widespread use. Her devotional repertoire is divided between Christ and Mary. She has a particular affection for the latter, fully developed in the explanation of the mysteries of the Rosary, but repeated in many of her shorter works. Through prayer the faithful ascends to reach the knowledge contained in Mary’s milk, a divine form of food. Symbolically, the mother of Christ is a source of wisdom and mercy, in whose arms and from whose breasts the Christian soul will understand the meaning of Christ’s life. This was a much beloved theme in late medieval literature.¹²⁶ She follows with the fifteen mysteries, or points of worship, that bind Mary to Christ, in a well-known route of Marian devotion that places her at the center of the narrative, and enhances her figure as the keeper and dispenser of God’s treasures. In fact, Mary’s memory and example are crucial elements of her writing corpus and are the inspirational root in the writings of Sor María Agueda.

The Passion of Christ is the theme of a work for meditation, *Meditaciones de la Sagrada Pasión* (Meditation on the Sacred Passion). Here she offered her sisters several forms of prayer to praise the sacrifice of Jesus’ crucifixion. A physical portrait of the Passion of Christ is used in *Modo fácil y provechoso de saludar y adorar los sacratísimos miembros de Je-suchristo en su santísima Pasión* (Easy and Productive Manner to Worship the Members of Jesus Christ in his Holiest Passion). In this prayer guide the nun used the body of Christ as a venue to extol his suffering, while begging for his forgiveness and love. Her didactic vein is also expressed in two works of spiritual exercises. The *Ejercicios de tres días* (Exercises for Three Days) was a manual written for her convent; her *Oratorio Espiritual* (Spiritual Oratory) was a slim book of meditations written at the request of a nun from the convent of San Jerónimo. Despite being minor works, María Anna assumes a literary authority that indicates a significant transformation in conventual culture. No longer hidden from the world, the teaching abilities of the nun can be shared with her sisters and a larger audience in the viceroyalty.

The work that is most relevant to daily conventual life is *Leyes del Amor Divino que debe guardar la fiel, amante esposa de Christo* (Laws of Divine Law to be Observed by the Loyal and Loving Bride of Christ), in which she explains the ten laws the bride of Christ must keep to please her divine groom.¹²⁷ The assumption that humility is the foundational virtue of the bride sets the tone of the book, which represents Christ as a noble, rich, strong, wise, and handsome groom. The bride must fulfill her feminine role to attract the groom, whose presence is the most desired goal in her life. The bride of Christ will understand that she must be humble to achieve the understanding of the infinite greatness of God. Mary, who will help the bride in

following the Rules, is recalled at the end of the explanation of each one of the Rules. Without her, the task of complying with the laws of divine love could be much harder.

The first law to be followed is that of pure and constant love; the second one is total surrender; the third law is to fix her eyes on God; the fourth is to listen attentively to him; the fifth is to shape her will to his; the sixth is to praise him; the seventh is to keep his honor; the eighth is to preserve his home; the ninth is to desire the highest perfection for his sake; the tenth is to imitate his life to achieve the final unitive state. In an oblique manner, the duties of the bride toward the groom bring to mind those that Fr. Luis de León recommended to the perfect wife in the sixteenth century.¹²⁸ The will of the bride, in all its potential facets, is oriented toward God. The nun is enticed to run to the arms of her chaste husband and give herself entirely to him, as he is jealous and cannot suffer to share his brides' attentions with any other worldly creature or material interest. Here, Sor María Anna Agueda follows well-known pastoral paths, but in this and other passages she uses her firsthand knowledge of conventual life to add immediacy to her words. She might have been remembering the scarcity of the beaterio in which she lived and which later became the convent where she professed, when she urged nuns not to deceive themselves thinking that work to earn a living was an excusable deterrent to their obligations to God. God would provide. There is an underlying understanding that the beatas and later the nuns had to engage in crafts to earn money for themselves and their institution. For María Anna, no occupation should interfere with their devotion to God and the fulfillment of the laws of divine love. Equally, she explains how, when the Lord hides himself and the nuns complained of "dryness" and lack of inspiration, one should see simply a strategy in the groom's love to make the bride more solicitous in her service.

She deftly covered all the senses of the body to advise how they could and should be subjected to the bride's goals, a pedagogical style popular since the seventeenth century, but here refined and less bombastic in tenor. The control of the senses would lead the bride to an eventual unitive state, one that she had herself experienced, but to which she refers only in a few and careful instances. Hers was not a visionary seventeenth-century style. She was, above all, a gifted pedagogue exercising a pastoral task: preaching through the written word. In a seamless way she weaves biblical sources with the everyday practical concerns on how to follow life as a religious with the utmost perfection. As she puts it in the sixth law, following the will of God, the nun will "accept promptly, with fervor, and happily" to carry out her duties in the convent, such as "mental and vocal prayer, communion, attending the mass, working, resting, and suffering bodily penitence and mortifications, in eating, drinking, and sleeping." In other words, she should obey him in all her willful actions and activities. Under the mantle of the laws of love is the directive that will make life in the convent a worthwhile endeavor and impart to it order and compliance from all its members. Her tone is quite different from that of Sor Manuela de San Antonio, her contemporary in the convent of San Bernardo in Mexico City, who wrote a manual of instruction for the novices in 1744.¹²⁹ Whereas Sor Manuela is harsh, Sor María Anna Agueda is soft, persuasive, and convincing, truly embodying the message of love. Her orthodoxy and the learned nature of her uncomplicated writing style lie at the bottom of her recognition and popularity as a devotional writer.

WHERE DOES SOR JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ FIT?

In a chapter surveying some key writings by nuns, the question of where Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz fits becomes inevitable. It is not my intention to review her writings in depth since there are literally thousands of analytical works devoted to her and I am not a literary critic. A brief survey of how she fits as a nun in the constellation of writers should suffice to place her in the cultural environment in which she chose to live her life.

Within the scope of conventual writers, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz stands out well above the rest of the nun-writers for the number, diversity, and quality of her production. Obviously, she was also very different in her abilities, but certainly not a rebel, a mystic, or a depressed self-deprecatory member of her community. While writing was the most important occupation of her life, she participated in the devotional duties of the convent. At a minimum, she observed the basic rules of behavior within the community. How did she carry out her literary activities within the schedule of conventual prayers and ceremonial duties she was expected to fulfill? This remains much of a mystery, as it is with most of the nuns under our purview. We simply do not know how they allocated time to write, although they often complained of their lack of it due to their many other occupations. Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad conveyed a picture of herself writing at night, falling asleep, and burning furniture and paper, but we cannot assume that others had the same experience. We know that Sor Juana was an accountant for some time, as well as the semi-official poet of a convent that lived in the shadow of the reputation enjoyed by one of its sisters. As such, she received many visitors who came to pay their respects. A strict abbess, probably tired or offended by Sor Juana's nonreligious activities, forbade her to write during her tenure. It was her prerogative to do so, and Sor Juana had no choice but to obey, which she did. This order was lifted soon enough and never repeated. As for the rest of her life, we can only speculate that while fulfilling some of her obligations within the convent, Sor Juana was spared from others by her several abbesses.

The didactic and devotional writings we have surveyed in this chapter as well as the personal behavior of some of their authors point to humility and self-effacement. In examining the discrepancy between conventual Rules and contemporary prescriptions for perfection in a nun, María Dolores Bravo underlines how Sor Juana simply did not accept the complete self-effacement and renunciation expected by prelates.¹³⁰ This also implies that she was given the option of being different. The accommodation of a gifted nun was a negotiated issue within each convent. San Jerónimo was a Hieronymite convent that did not practice a rigorous internal discipline. Sor Juana had her own cell and a slave to serve her. She was allowed a library and free time to write and to receive visitors, as was common practice in her days. The best sources of knowledge about Sor Juana, the person, are her own works and her pointed self-defense in the letter she wrote to the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz. This was the only time she indulged in self-deprecation, but rhetorical negation of the value of her writings and the claim she wrote only as an obligation cannot be taken literally. Although a fervent Catholic, she spent her day in activities other than prayers and had very little in common with most of the nuns under review in this work. The bishop's despair over the worldly nature of most of her writings was understandable from his perspective—though certainly not ours. Excited by the nature of her theological flight in her *Carta Atenagórica*, he was also disappointed that she had taken a route that put her close to heretical statements. For her own sake and the sake of her soul, he would have preferred her to write religious poems in the vein of the few that have been found written by other seventeenth-century nuns, but Sor Juana was not a woman cut out for piety or mystic raptures and she could not—or would not—conceal her more extensive gifts.¹³¹

After reviewing the writings generated in convents, we can safely conclude that nunneries were not anti-intellectual institutions. They nurtured learning among their gifted members and patronized the arts gracing their buildings. However, conventual learning was expected to follow a prescribed path, and deviations were not welcomed. Insofar as Sor Juana wrote a large number of works not related to religious pursuits, she was an anomaly. However, if one examines the nature of her production, it is obvious that much of it could still be accommodated within the walls of the cloisters. Her poetic submissions to the city's festivities were perhaps the first in her century, but other nuns in the eighteenth century also sent entries to lay civic contests. Her poems to vicereines as well as those dedicated to the King of Spain were expected literary courtesies from someone of her talent and her gender, and even if the former were deeply personal, they were not offensive to her prelates. Sor Juana's theatrical pieces fit into a practice whereby

patrons commissioned works for representation. Some of her “loas” were performed in private homes and the viceregal palace.¹³² Her reported study on music would not have been alien to Sor Nicolasa de la Santísima Trinidad, a Pueblan Carmelite reputed for her interest in musical composition. Her theological knowledge would have found an echo with Sor Melchora de la Asunción, Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, and other nuns who were more than simply acquainted with biblical and patristic knowledge and whose works have been lost, or who perhaps never took writing seriously for lack of encouragement and overstressed humility. If we turn to her many villancicos, her spiritual exercises, and her masterful *Divino Narciso*, we see a comfortable fit within the accepted canons of religious writing. Even if Sor Juana filled these works with concepts and suggestions that still keep critics pondering over their meaning, they were canonical at their base.¹³³ In general, and until she made some tactical mistakes in her writing, she was in tune with her times even though her religious writings were few in number compared to the rest of her work.

It was her reinterpretations in the theological field that brought her personal trouble in the early 1690s, because she dared to reinterpret current canon as expressed in sermons of famous preachers—whether it was Antonio Vieira or Antonio Núñez. This put her on treacherous grounds. Anyone, not just Sor Juana, who challenged post-Tridentine theological interpretation of the greatest gifts of Christ to humanity would have attracted the attention of the Inquisitors. As the extant archives of the Inquisition prove beyond doubt, many other religious persons, men and women, had to answer for their “re-interpretation” of canon. If she did not fall into inquisitorial hands it was because she was too smart, and she knew how to retreat and avoid a confrontation, even at the cost of some of her own intellectual freedom. She paid dearly in her own conscience and chafed under the strictures applied to her by the Archbishop of Mexico, as he ordered her to divest herself of her books as penance for her behavior.

Thus, having made a case for the possibility that Sor Juana’s writings were acceptable within the boundaries of conventual life, what remains to be restated are the parameters of her behavior compared to that of others. Unlike other nuns, it is apparent that Sor Juana did not write under the direction or pressure of her confessors. Her disagreement with the Jesuit Antonio Núñez, her main confessor and promoter of her profession, is only too well known to bear repeating, and indicates that when he put pressure on her, she succeeded in freeing herself from his influence. She always had, however, good spiritual direction under men of proved orthodoxy, who did not seem to have interfered with her writing. Other nuns, as we have seen, also dispensed with their confessors if they proved to be utterly incompatible. On the other hand, the lack of mystical inclinations sets her apart from the visionary nuns of the seventeenth century. Sor Juana entered the convent not to fulfill a religious vocation, but to have the freedom to study despite her declared dislike for communal life. She could not stand the rigors of the Carmelites and left three months after entering the convent of San José. San Jerónimo gave her a welcome niche and she took advantage of it, with what was cooperative support of her community and her own strong resolve not to be drowned in the waters of faith and piety.

In regard to this well-sustained separation between her writing and her faith, it is useful to remember the little-known case of another contemporary nun, who wished to emulate Sor Juana but who was felled by the ax of her own religiosity, much to the happiness of her superiors. She was Agustina de San Diego, a member of a distinguished family of wealth and lettered religious men, described as “beautiful, discreet, noble and virtuous.” In family lineage she had some advantages over Sor Juana. Orphaned of both parents in her childhood, she was sheltered by four religious aunts in the convent of Saint Clare in Puebla, where she professed at fifteen. According to the preacher who wrote her funeral sermon, she spent her time in the convent acquiring Latin to perfection and totally engulfed in books of secular erudition. These he judged to be “little golden dishes for serving the soul the sweetness of words, all for the purpose of replying to and corresponding with our phoenix poetess Mother Juana Inés de la Cruz, with whom she had established an unproductive love affair based on faith: this effort in itself proves the valiant vivacity of her intelligence.”¹³⁴ He characterized her life as squandered youth (*desbarate de su juventud*), ignoring her higher calling. Yet, her own remorse about her intellectual inclinations moved her to offer to submit to confession, take communion, pray thirty-three “Creeds” for thirty weeks, and to ask Saint Anthony of Padua to give her the opportunity to experience “divine pain to atone for her sins.” All this was in perfect agreement with the remarks I have made about the common religious crises suffered by colonial nuns. Her contacts with Sor Juana must have withstood this remorse because, on the last Friday of her avowed penitential exercise, she was called to the grilles to greet the Bishop of Oaxaca, and his retinue. He was on his way to his diocese, and “had brought loving gifts, a portrait, and recommendations from Sor Juana to Sor Agustina.” On her way to greet the bishop she performed a pious act she was used to: to kiss the feet of an icon of Christ in his sepulcher. As her funerary eulogy states, a “miracle” took place. Christ grabbed her arm and told her with severity, “Agustina, you are not supposed to know more than is fitting to know.”¹³⁵ The shock of the experience left her speechless and fearful, and she had to resort to another nun to help her “free herself from the grip.” It was a life-changing event. She dismissed her visitors, called a confessor, and gave up all her belongings and her interest in learning. The preacher extolled her conversion as similar to that of Paul and Ignatius. Sor Agustina may not have written anything, but until she gave up learning, she was among the nuns whose inclinations to read and learn were not obstructed by their conventual superiors. The good fortune of Sor Juana—and ours as her readers—is that neither her faith nor her confessors or abbesses succeeded in interfering with her work until her middle age and what turned out to be the last days of her life.¹³⁶ However far ahead of her times Sor Juana was, she still faced seventeenth-century reins on women’s intellectuality. She could choose the conventual retreat to be able to write, but the ultimate freedom to challenge orthodoxy, even in a marginal way, was denied to her. Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, would have given his heart twice over if Sor Juana would have chosen to write on topics more appropriate to her state. In her answer to his enticements Sor Juana debated freedom of the intellect but ended with a tame and possibly bitter submission to authority. Sor Juana, the writer, eventually took on officially, the cross of the nun.

A retrospective look at nuns’ writings points to a common language: that of cloistered women whose confined lives shaped their thematic choices and modes of expression. Despite many individual nuances, they used a vocabulary suitable to their common spiritual needs, and enunciated their sentiments with a ring familiar to themselves, thus understandable to their own sorority. In a very important sense they were members of a family of “sisters” in religion as their words were learned from the same sources and knit together with common intellectual and grammatical threads. They could read each other and find themselves in their writings, in which solitude, dryness, and failure to live up to their own standards of spiritual and material sacrifice were paired with the joy and consolation received from visions of the divine world and their beloved groom. As they wrote they addressed their own demons, but they also tapped a rich vein of didactic and mothering venues in their desire to teach each other and remember the already departed. Their relationship with the men under whose advice and authority they stood was complex but definitely not totally negative, as they yielded some of the writings for which they are remembered today.¹³⁷ As for the men themselves, what is worth remembering is how many, on listening to feminine voices revealing the wonders of their spiritual worlds, were willing to stand in awe and admiration of their disciples’ inner truths. In sum, the writings produced in the cloisters or inspired by their cloistered lives reveal a world of complex individual yearnings. Its gates are just open, and this brief survey simply intends to reveal the history of women’s writings to the curiosity of future readers who may help to further unfold their meaningful messages.

Epilogue



The foundation of fifty-seven convents for women in the viceroyalty of New Spain in slightly over two hundred and fifty years speaks of a deeply and strongly rooted feminine religious culture. Convents developed as European urbanization spread in the New World and brought with it the lingering memory of the proliferation of women's monasteries and female spirituality that had flourished in twelfth-century Europe. This spirituality also bore the imprint of Spain's own religious burst in the sixteenth century, after its triumph over Islam, its adoption of a militant Roman Catholicism in Europe, and its role as evangelizer of the indigenous in the New World. There is no better way to measure the impact of Catholic reformation in the sixteenth century and Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century than to witness its vigorous expansion in New Spain, as Mexico was called for three centuries.

Unquestionably, women had an important role to play in the "evangelization" process of New Spain, although not in the active way of friars and clergy. Ironically, their own immobility and sheltered condition as cloistered women were to create a different culture of female archetypes in the colonial setting. They introduced devotional practices specifically promoted to cater to female affectivity, with Christ and Mary at their center, and also enhancing the new cult of the saints that was a sign of seventeenth-century Catholicism. They developed models of piety that by denying the world would reaffirm their presence in it. Their very isolation behind walls became a magnet that mesmerized communities and encouraged patrons to seek foundations and endow them. They attracted women aspirants who wished to be a part of these hothouses of spirituality. In the New World, the worship of Mary in its many iconic apparitions would become emblematic of a local and regional piety that would create for those born there an identity that lasted beyond the period of political subjection to Spain. The Guadalupan worship transcended New Spain and became a national Mexican emblem. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a product of seventeenth-century society and culture, would also become an iconic figure in the twentieth century. There is no denying that what are today's part of popular culture were manifestations of yesterday's elite culture. As national fixations, they require a contextualization that explains their meaning and transformation as they emerged in Mexican society.

This general overview of nuns and conventual life, it is hoped, will help to achieve that goal. It is abundantly clear that the privileged women who lived in those fifty-seven monasteries were only a small percentage of the population. Numbers, however, emphasized uniqueness and quality. It was always understood that Christ selected his brides, and not vice versa, despite the eagerness professed by some aspirants. Humans (ecclesiastic authorities, patrons, and the Crown) mediated by ensuring that only those they considered the flower of womanhood would be eligible. Early modern society was not democratic. It believed firmly in social distinctions. Convents reflected that reality but, under pressure and some personal inspiration, the church eventually cracked open the door to indigenous women. Mexico was the only part of the Spanish empire to create convents for them, a distinction that while not easily achieved, was still significant as it became a reality and gave Roman Catholicism a "new world" identity. Convents reflected well their own society. They were essentially traditional institutions, but flexible enough to undergo the changes necessary to adapt themselves to a different social and geographic milieu, and become significantly embedded into a society that, by the end of the eighteenth century, had evolved from being a replica of Spanish institutions to possessing its own identity.

Only by looking into the private lives of convents can we hope to capture the full depth of how they operated and defined themselves as institutions as well as the locus of piety. The details of the internal life of convents reveal the intimate world of nuns with nuances that were best known to themselves, and not necessarily common knowledge in their own time or ours, despite the popular lore surrounding those institutions. One can best define each convent as a self-ruled society of women sharing social and spiritual values and organized in a clearly hierarchical fashion, despite the spirit of sisterhood and familial "kinship" proposed by its Rules. That internal order was essential for its proper function, but the personality of each and all of its nuns had also to be acknowledged and respected for the institution to fulfill its mission as a place to search for and meet God.

In the New World, the presence of slaves and indigenous women enriched the social mix of those enclosed spaces, despite the limitations imposed on their full acceptance as members of the community. However, despite all the peculiarities that eventually marked the differentiation from the Spanish sources from which they emerged, all convents owed a cultural debt to Europe. They followed Rules, originated in Europe, that were not susceptible to any official change and were part of the universal body of Roman Catholicism. Through the passing of time communities began to form habits of observance that became their *modus vivendi* and a lifestyle that nuns appropriated as their defining heritage. While some among the male hierarchy accepted such changes, others fought them as deviations from the original. The prolonged debate on *vida común* was the most notable confrontation between colonial "tradition" and European interpretation of what observance should be. The new "American way" gained in that battle, because the nuns had already created their own religious culture and were willing to defend it. It was also an example of how women held their own when faced with male pressure.

Stepping into a convent means to appreciate its daily and material life as well as the spiritual life of its occupants. The many details emerging from the archival and written sources of the period underline both the humanity of the nuns as well as their spiritual and affective aspirations. The personal details of life, observance, and interaction among themselves and with those outside is in itself a rich chapter in women's history. Women outside and inside the convent related to each other as well as with men. Patronesses and patrons fixed their own religious and social aspirations on the foundation and sustenance of convents, sometimes beyond their means, but always mindful of the value of their actions. Despite their vow of claustration, nuns brought to the convent their own cultural baggage as well as the material culture from which they had emerged and in which they had been educated. There was the illusion of rejecting the world, but the world did not reject the consecrated brides of Christ. They became a special part of it precisely because of what they meant to those whom they had left outside. In a broad sense, the convent as an institution was also very much embedded in its society. Ties to the community were remarkably strong. Beyond receiving a number of its female elite, convents received charities and pious deeds and became themselves sources of capital, and lenders and owners of real estate. They employed large numbers of artists, artisans, and common workers. They provided the city with temples to pray in and helped celebrate religious feasts that marked the highlights of social events for all people, from the poorest to the richest. They made continuous spiritual exchange with all members of society, offering their prayers for the believers and acting as

intercessors for all souls in popular piety. If we use the number of female convents founded in the viceroyalty as an indicator of the meaning of these benefits for those who received them, we must conclude that the exchange was considered fair.

If there is any topic that deserves special attention and is likely to reward the researcher in the future, it is that of the religious culture of the New World, of which nunneries were obviously an important element. As urban institutions in an essentially urban culture, nunneries expressed models of religious behavior and worship. Women had always had an important role in the shaping of religious habits, and cloistered women, with their solid presence in urban areas, were indeed a key part of this process. Taking as an example that of the visionary world that began to thrive in the seventeenth century, we can appreciate how it was largely enacted by women, professed or lay, and how it became enmeshed in popular culture. The stories of devotion to relics of dying or dead nuns, their mediation and intercession on behalf of the souls of Purgatory, and the number of them that figured in the list for potential beatification, speak for a prolonged popular love affair with the brides of Christ. The Counter-Reformation revived and reaffirmed the value of the mystical marriage of virgins to Christ. The most cursory reading of the sermons of profession and eulogies of lives of deceased sisters indicate that in a society in which sexual looseness had established non-European patterns of race mixtures and illegitimate births, the value of the nuptials with Christ became a most desirable ideal.

Among the other themes that seem to emerge from the pages of conventual history, that of gender relations and issues of “engendered” power is one that contains numerous possibilities of approach. Here I can only underline its importance and suggest that it runs throughout all aspects of conventual life. Despite being spaces dedicated to women, convents were ultimately dependent on the control of a male hierarchy. The fact that within their walls women held a firm hand on their own affairs did not invalidate the presence of those men. In fact, the relationship among them stretched from the institutional, as their prelates, to the personal, as confessors and spiritual advisors. In these roles they exercised their male authority, not exempt of a good dosage of condescending paternalism. They even abused it when their sexuality ran out of control. In this world, in which men and women played a delicate balance of wills, maintaining flexibility at both ends was essential to retain a modicum of self-respect in their respective grounds. When that flexibility was missing, tensions built and confrontations took place, as a number of incidents in this book show. None of them, however, made lasting disruptions in their long-term relationship because many men, lay and religious, respected nuns as special women enduring a “sacrifice” that common women would not attempt. Further, some were repositories of special “gifts” that men did not have. They provided inspiration not only to those in close contact with them, but also among the reading public addressed in the abundant religious literature of the period, largely authored by men. Lacking the reading culture, believers used the grapevine to create and consolidate a local folklore worship of saintly or visionary women.

Women’s spirituality in the colonial period is a complex mixture of rules, forms of observance, daily rituals and prayers, personal and community discipline, and devotional practices. By stepping into convents we explore a territory designed for women, populated by women, and shaped by them in their own fashion, despite the intrusion of male oversight. Here is the opportunity to seek and find an essentially feminine space that, if not representative of all women, encapsulated the experience of those who became emblematic of key values of their time and society. Not all nuns were exceptional in their abilities or religiosity, but their distinctiveness and their special way of life retained the essence of womanhood peculiar to their times. What they gave up in real life, like marriage, maternity, or freedom of movement, they re-created in a sublimated and spritual way within the cloister. They are also among the few women who left numerous tracks of their lives and thoughts for us to examine. This we can only do by joining them in their own space, and that has been the objective of this work.

Appendix

Convents of New Spain: Foundation Date and Religious Affiliation

The sources of the following information are: María Concepción Amerlinck de Corsi and Manuel Ramos Medina, *Conventos de Monjas. Fundaciones en el México Virreinal*. Mexico: Condumex, 1995; and Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de Monjas en la Nueva España*. Mexico: Editorial Santiago, 1946. The first date is either that of the royal permit or the papal bull. Convents sometimes took years to be effectively founded. The second date, if available, is that of the year when they were consolidated as religious communities.

MEXICO CITY

La Concepción, 1540, Conceptionist Order.

Regina Coeli, 1573, Conceptionist Order.

Santa Clara, 1573, Franciscan Order.

Jesús María, 1581, Conceptionist Order.

San Jerónimo and Santa Paula, 1585, Hieronymite Order.

Nuestra Señora de la Encarnación, 1593, Conceptionist Order.

Santa Catalina de Siena, 1593, Dominican Order.

San Juan de la Penitencia, 1598, Franciscan Order.

San Lorenzo, 1598, Augustinian Order.

Santa Inés, 1595–96, Conceptionist Order. Effective in 1600.

Santa Isabel, 1601, Franciscan Order.

San José de Gracia, 1610, Conceptionist Order.

San José (Santa Teresa la Antigua), 1616, Carmelite Order.

Nuestra Señora de Balvanera, 1634, Conceptionist Order. This year the enclosed women wore the habit of this Order. Prior to this date, its status as a convent was unclear.

San Bernardo, 1636, Conceptionist Order.

San Felipe de Jesús, 1666, Franciscan Capuchin Order.

Santa Teresa la Nueva, 1700, Carmelite Order. Effective in 1704.

Corpus Christi, 1724, Franciscan Order.

El Salvador y Santa Brígida, 1735, Brigittine Order. Effective in 1744.

Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza, 1752, Order of Mary, La Enseñanza Antigua. Effective in 1754.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Villa of Guadalupe), 1780, Franciscan Capuchin Order. Effective in 1787.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, 1811, Order of Mary, La Enseñanza Nueva.

PUEBLA

Santa Catalina de Siena, 1568, Dominican Order.

La Concepción, 1593, Conceptionist Order.

San Jerónimo, 1597, Hieronymite Order. Effective in 1600.

San José (Santa Teresa), 1604, Carmelite Order. Effective in 1607.

Santa Clara, 1607, Franciscan Order.

La Santísima Trinidad, 1619, Conceptionist Order.

Santa Inés de Montepulciano, 1620, Dominican Order. Effective in 1616.

Santa Mónica, 1686, Augustinian Order. Effective in 1688.

Santa Ana, 1704, Franciscan Capuchin Order.

Santa Rosa, 1735 (royal cédula), Dominican Order. Effective in 1740.

Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, 1747, Carmelite Order. Effective in 1748.

VILLA DE CARRIÓN-ATLIXCO (ALSO ATRISCO)

Santa Clara, 1617–18, Franciscan Order.

VALLADOLID

Santa Catalina de Siena, 1595, Dominican Order.

Nuestra Señora de Cosamaloapán, 1737, Franciscan Order.

PÁTZCUARO

María Inmaculada de la Salud, 1744, Dominican Order. Effective in 1747.

QUERÉTARO

Santa Clara de Jesús, 1607, Franciscan Order.

San José de Gracia, 1717, Franciscan Capuchin Order. Effective in 1721.

Nuestra Señora del Carmen or El Dulce Nombre de Jesús, 1802–03, Carmelite Order. Effective in 1805.

SALVATIERRA

La Purísima y San Francisco, 1767, Franciscan Capuchin Order. Effective in 1798.

SAN MIGUEL EL GRANDE

La Purísima Concepción, 1754, Conceptionist Order. Effective in 1756.

IRAPUATO

Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, 1804, Order of Mary, La Enseñanza.

GUADALAJARA

La Concepción, 1578, Conceptionist Order.

Santa María de Gracia, 1588, Dominican Order.

Santa Teresa, 1695, Carmelite Order.

Santa Mónica, 1718, Augustinian Order. Effective in 1720.

Jesús María, 1719, Dominican Order. Effective in 1722.

La Purísima Concepción y San Ignacio de Loyola, 1761, Franciscan Capuchin Order.

SANTA MARÍA DE LOS LAGOS

Señor San José, 1756, Franciscan Capuchin Order.

AGUASCALIENTES

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, 1805–07, Order of Mary.

MÉRIDA

Nuestra Señora de la Consolación, 1596, Conceptionist Order.

ANTEQUERA DE OAXACA

Santa Catalina de Siena, 1576, Dominican Order.

Regina Coeli, 1576, Conceptionist Order.

Santa Mónica (Nuestra Señora de la Soledad), 1697, Augustinian Order.

San José, 1744, Franciscan Order.

Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, 1767–68, Franciscan Order. Effective in 1782.

CIUDAD REAL OR SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Nuestra Señora de la Encarnación, 1595, Conceptionist Order.

Notes

The following abbreviations are used in the Notes:

AGI	Archivo General de Indias, Seville (Spain)
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico
AHPFM	Archivo Histórico de la Provincia Franciscana de Michoacán
AHSSA, JM	Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, Mexico, Fondos del Convento de Jesús María
AIPG	Archivo de Instrumentos Públicos, Guadalajara
AINAH, FF	Archivo del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Fondo Franciscano
BN, FF	Biblioteca Nacional, Fondo Franciscano (Mexico)
BN Mexico	Biblioteca Nacional de Mexico
BN Madrid	Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid
AGN, BN	Bienes Nacionales
GSU AHAOM	Genealogical Society of Utah, Archivo Histórico del Antiguo Obispado de Michoacán
HAHR	<i>Hispanic American Historical Review</i>
LC	Library of Congress
Leg.	Legajo
UT NLBC	University of Texas, Nettie Lee Benson Collection

INTRODUCTION

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6 Pilar a Foz y Foz, *La revolución pedagógica en Nueva España (1754–1820)*, 2 Vols. (Madrid: Instituto “Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo” [C.S.I.C.], 1981).

7 Asunción Lavrin, “La escritura desde un mundo oculto: espiritualidad y anonimidad en el convento de San Juan de la Penitencia,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 22 (2000): 49–75; “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Obediencia y autoridad en su entorno religioso,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, nos. 172–73 (Julio–Diciembre 1995): 602–22; “Espiritualidad en el claustro novohispano del siglo XVII,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 4.2 (1995): 155–79; “La Vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: Biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 3–4

(1993): 27–52; Rosalva Loreto López, “Leer, contar, cantar y escribir. Un acercamiento a las prácticas de la lectura conventual. Puebla de los Angeles. Siglos XVII y XVIII,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 23 (2000): 67–95, and “La sensibilidad y el cuerpo en el imaginario de las monjas poblanas del siglo XVII.” In Manuel Ramos Medina, coord., *Memorias del II Congreso Internacional del Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español: Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios* (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 541–55; Luz del Carmen Vallarta, “Tiempo de muerte en tiempo de vida.” In Ramos Medina, *Memorias del II Congreso Internacional*, 573–82.

8 Jacqueline Holler, “*Escogidas Plantas: Nuns and Beatas in Mexico City, 1531–1601* (New York: Columbia University, 2005).

9 Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

10 Manuel Ramos Medina, coord., *Memoria del II Congreso Internacional del Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español, Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios* (Mexico: Condumex, 1995); María Isabel Viforcós Marinas and María Dolores Campos Sánchez-Bordona, coord., *Fundadores, fundaciones y espacios de vida conventual. Nuevas aportaciones al monacato femenino* (León: Universidad de León, 2005).

11 Georgina Sabat de Rivers, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.” In *La cultura letrada en la Nueva España del siglo XVII*, Vol. 2 of *Historia de la literatura Mexicana*, 619–71 (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2002). See the Bibliography for other works by this author.

12 Kristine Ibsen, *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

13 Kathleen Myers and Amanda Powell, ed. and trans. *A Wild Country Out in the Garden. The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Kathleen Myers, *Word from New Spain. The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656–1719)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993).

14 Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, *Colonial Angels. Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico, 1580–1750* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

15 Kathleen Ross, *The Baroque Narrative of Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora: A New World Paradise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

16 Jennifer Eich, *The Other Mexican Muse. Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio (1695–1756)* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2004); Jennifer Eich, “Giving the Devil His Due: A Man’s Place in Women’s Spiritual Narratives,” *Confluencia* 14.1 (Fall 1998): 67–81, and “The Body as a Conventual Space of Resistance.” In *Mapping Colonial Spanish America. Places and Commonplaces of Identity, Culture, and Experience*, ed. Santa Arias and Mariselle Meléndez (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001), 202–220; Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

17 Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, eds., *Monjas y beatas. La escritura femenina en la espiritualidad barroca novohispana. Siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico: Archivo General de la Nación/Puebla: Universidad de las Américas, 2002); Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, eds., *Diálogos espirituales. Letras femeninas Hispanoamericanas. Siglos XVI-XIX* (Puebla: Universidad de las Américas/Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2006); Rosalva Loreto López, “Escrito por ella misma. Vida de la Madre Francisca de la Natividad.” In Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, eds., *Monjas y beatas. La escritura femenina en la espiritualidad barroca novohispana. Siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico: Archivo General de la Nación/Puebla: Universidad de las Américas, 2002), 24–66.

18 Alicia Bazarte Martínez and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, *El Convento de San Jerónimo en Puebla de los Angeles. Crónicas y testimonios* (Puebla: Litografía Magno Graf, S.A. de C.V., 2000); Alicia Bazarte Martínez, Enrique Tovar, and Martha A. Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo, 1598–1867* (Mexico: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, 2001).

19 For a review of the concept of bride of Christ, see John Bugge, *Virginitas. An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Hijhoff, 1975), 59–79.

20 See the study of Nancy E. van Deusen for the viceroyalty of Peru, *The Souls of Purgatory. The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth-Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Ursula de Jesús* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 2004).

CHAPTER ONE

EPIGRAPH: BN Mexico. Vida de la Madre María Marcela, religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro copiada por una religiosa Brígida en 1844, fol 54.

1 The usual statement was “that she has always had an inclination for the religious state.” AGI, Mexico, Leg. 809; AGN, BN, leg. 85, 186, 213, 310, 327. For Spain, see María Helena Sánchez Ortega, *La mujer y la sexualidad en el antiguo régimen. La perspectiva inquisitorial* (Madrid: AKAL Universitaria, 1992), 107–31. On nuns in Europe, see Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms. Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

2 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 343; Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Familia y orden colonial* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1998), 70–75; Asunción Lavrin and Edith Couturier, “Dowries and Wills: A View of Women’s Socioeconomic Role in Colonial Guadalajara and Puebla, 1640–1790,” *HAHR* 59.2 (May 1979): 280–304.

3 Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, “Las cargas del matrimonio. Dotes y vida familiar en la Nueva España.” In *Familia y vida privada en la historia de Iberoamérica*, coord. Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Cecilia Rabell Romero (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico/UNAM, 1996), 207–26; Verónica Zárate Toscano, “Estrategias matrimoniales de una familia noble: Los marqueses de Selvanevada en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII y la primera del XIX.” In Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Rabell Romero, *Familia y vida privada*, 227–54; Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en Nueva España* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1987).

4 For a review of marriage, profession, and women’s social roles in Spain, see Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Sánchez Ortega, *La mujer y la sexualidad en el antiguo régimen*; Milagros Ortega Costa, “Spanish Women in the Reformation.” In *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe*, ed. Sherrin Marshall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 89–119; Mariló Vigil, *La vida de las mujeres en los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, S.A. 1986); Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa. Religious Reform in a Sixteenth Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); José Luis Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de religiosidad barroca* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1988); Cristina Segura Graíño, *La voz del silencio. Fuentes directas para la historia de las mujeres siglos VIII and XVIII* (Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1992); Isabelle Poutrin, *Le voile et la plume. Autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l'Espagne moderne* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1995), *passim*; Agustín Redondo, coord., *Images de la femme en Espagne au XVI et XVII siècles* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1994); Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Marta V. Vicente and Luis R. Corteguera, eds., *Women, Texts and Authority in Early Modern Spain* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003); Milagros Ortega Costa, Asunción Lavrin, and Pilar Pérez Cantó, coords., *Historia de las mujeres en España y América Latina* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2005), Vol. 2, *passim*.

5 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 336A. Letter of Archbishop Moya de Contreras to the king. Here he states the foundation would be for daughters and granddaughters of conquistadors and other persons of “diverse qualifications” who “for lack of a dowry cannot take state according to the quality of their persons, on account of which they endanger their honor and their conscience, forcing or stimulating them to fall in vices, sins and the offense of God, with scandal and bad example for this republic”; Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental Plantado y cultivado por las liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnifico real convento de Jesús María de Mexico* (Mexico: UNAM/Conduxem, 1995), 5–6.

6 On the concept of honor, see Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets. Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Lyman Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, eds., *The Faces of Honor. Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

7 Concubinage and free unions are difficult to document in numbers. Most historians use indexes of births out of wedlock to infer the existence of such unions. See Julia Hirschberg, “Social Experiments in New Spain: A Prosopographical Study of the Early Settlement at Puebla de los Angeles, 1531–1534,” *HAHR*, 59 (1979): 1–33; Robert McCaa, “Tratos nupciales: La constitución de uniones formales e informales en Mexico y España, 1500–1900. In Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Rabell Romero, *Familia y vida privada*, 21–58; Thomas Calvo, *Guadalajara y su región en el siglo XVII: Población y economía* (Guadalajara, CEMCVAH/ Ayuntamiento de Guadalajara, 1992).

8 Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, coord., *Familias Novohispanas. Siglos XVI al XIX* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1991). On girls in convents, see Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en Nueva España* (Mexico: Editorial Santiago, 1946).

9 AGI, Leg. 336 A-B; Guillermo Porras Muñoz, *Personas y lugares de la ciudad de Mexico, siglo XVI* (Mexico: UNAM, 1988), 89–106; Jacqueline Holler, “*Escogidas Plantas: Nuns and Beatas in Mexico City, 1531–1601* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

10 See Chapter 8. In Perú, mestizas were allowed to profess more frequently than in New Spain. See Kathryn Burns, *Conventual Habits. Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en la Nueva España*, 213–14; Donald Chipman, “Isabel de Moctezuma: Pioneer of *Mestizaje*.” In *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America*, ed. David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 214–27.

11 At the time of foundation Tapia did not make any demands for the admission of other Indian women. See “Testimonio de Cuaderno de Autos Fundación del Convento de Santa Clara de Querétaro.” Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico, Conduxem, Fondo 94 CDXC.

12 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 336A. Archbishop Moya de Contreras advised prelates that for admission in Jesús María they should consider the candidates’ degree of “risk,” preferring “in quality, the nobles to the plebeians, the orphaned to those with parents; they should be maidens, Spaniards, of exemplary life and reputation. Do not admit *cuarteronas* (one-quarter non-Spaniard) or widows except with much thought and evident benefit. No mestizas of any kind.” The rare profession of a mestiza is recorded in Santa Clara, Puebla, in 1798. See AINAH, FF vol. 108, fol. 54.

13 See Chapter 8. See also Holler, “*Escogidas Plantas*,” 167–182.

14 Ronald E. Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain. The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), and *The Guitar of God: Gender, Power and Authority in the Visionary World of Mother Juana de la Cruz (1481–1534)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Geraldine McKendrick and Angus MacKay, “Visionaries and Affective Spirituality During the First Half of the Sixteenth Century.” In *Cultural Encounters. The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Gilliam T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991); Julio Caro Baroja, *Las formas complejas de la vida religiosa: Religión, sociedad y carácter en la España de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid: AKAL, 1978); Leslie K. Twomey, ed., *Faith and Fanaticism. Religious Fervor in Early Modern Spain* (London: Ashgate, 1997).

15 Caro Baroja, *Las formas complejas de la vida religiosa*; Isaías Rodríguez, O.C.D., *Santa Teresa de Jesús y la espiritualidad española* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1972); Alvaro Huerfano, *Historia de los alumbrados*, Vol. III, *Los alumbrados de Hispanoamérica (1570–1605)* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1986); Angela Muñoz Fernández, *Acciones e intenciones de mujeres. Vida religiosa de las madrileñas (ss. XV–XVI)* (Madrid: hora y HORAS, Editorial, 1995).

16 Juan Uvaldo de Anguita, *El Divino verbo sembrado en la tierra Virgen de María Santísima Nuestra Señora da por fruto una cosecha de vírgenes* (Mexico: Imprenta Real del Superior Gobierno y del Nuevo Rezado de Doña María de Ribera, 1743).

17 Thomas Calvo, “The Warmth of the Hearth: Seventeenth-Century Guadalajara Families.” In *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Ascensión Lavrin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 287–312; Claudio Esteva-Fabregat, *Mestizaje in Ibero-America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994); Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Familia y orden colonial*, 155–83.

18 Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets*, chapters 3 and 4.

19 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp.18; Leg. 100, exp. 16, 18.

20 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp 12. In that same year María de los Dolores Barrios, also born out-of-wedlock, and eighteen years old, was admitted possibly because she had been brought up in the convent and had learned how to play the double-bass and the bassoon. See AGN, Leg. 85, exp. 14, and exp. 16, 18; Leg. 100, exp. 17, 18; Leg. 156, exp. 5; AGN, Clero Regular y Secular, Vol. 177, exp. 4. A poor and out-of-wedlock woman could profess as a lay nun to perform manual labor. See, AIPG, García de Argomanis, vol. 15 (1718), fol. 155v.

21 Dorothy Schons, “Some Obscure Points in the Life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” *Modern Philology* 24.2 (1926): 141–62, and *Algunos parientes de sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Mexico: Imprenta Mundial, 1935).

22 Francisco Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias diocesanas del Obispado de Puebla* (Puebla: Imprenta del Real Seminario Palafoxiano, 1770), 84–90; AGI, Mexico, 2753, fol. 128v.

23 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 3–80; Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ. Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 19–45; Clarissa Atkinson, “‘Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass’: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages,” *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983): 131–43; John Bugge, *Virginitas. An Essay on the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975); Anne Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih, eds., *Medieval Virginites* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Misogynist and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church.” In *Religion and Sexism. Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150–83.

24 Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography. Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 244–50.

25 St. Rita de Cascia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13064a.htm>; Manuel Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas. Fundaciones femeninas Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997), 277, 278, 288.

26 Fr. Miguel Rodríguez de Santo Tomas, *Memorial ajustado de la vida y virtudes de la M.R.M. Antonia del Señor San Joaquín, religiosa profesada en el convento de Santa Catarina de Sena* (Mexico: Imp. de los herederos de María de Ribera, 1760); Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 56–128, 135. A substantial part of Sigüenza y Góngora’s book is devoted to the life of Sor Marina de la Cruz, a widow who professed in the convent of Jesús María, and was the founder of the first discalced Carmelite convent in Mexico City; Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto, monja profesada de velo negro y hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro*. (Mexico: Imprenta de Antuerpia de los herederos de la viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1689); Juan de Robles, *Oración fúnebre, elogio sepulcral de la muy ilustre y venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto, religiosa profesada de velo negro en el observantísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús en la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1685).

27 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 76.

28 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo del muy religioso convento de San José, de religiosas Carmelitas descalzas de la ciudad de Puebla de los Angeles* [1732] (Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Puebla/ Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992), 215–19.

29 AGN, Historia, Vol. 77; Josefina Muriel and Alicia Grobet, *Fundaciones neoclásicas. La Marquesa de Selvanevada. Sus conventos y sus arquitectos* (Mexico: UNAM, 1969); Josefina Muriel, *Cultura femenina novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1994), 87–88

30 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 294, 305. See also Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*. In *Teatro Mexicano* (Mexico: Doña María de Benavides, Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1697), 97. Doña Isabel Benítez took the habit in Santa Isabel, Mexico, after the death of her husband. Her daughter was raised in the convent and professed as María de la Purificación; Fr. Miguel de Torres, *Vida ejemplar y muerte preciosa de la Madre Bárbara Josepha de San Francisco* (Mexico, 1721); Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Santiago de*

Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España [1645] (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900), 359, 458, 489.

- 31 AIPG, Protocolos de D. Blas de Silva, Vol. 26, fol. 177. A professing nun leaves 3,000 pesos for the dowry of another girl; Juan A. Vizarrón y Eguiarreta, *Fundaciones de capellanías de misas y dotes para religiosas perpetuamente anuales* (Mexico, 1734). Archbishop Vizarrón left 80,000 pesos invested in rural estates for the endowment of girls of the schools and convents of Mexico City to marry or profess. See AGN, BN, vol. 310, exp. 14, 15.
- 32 Miguel Ramón Pinilla, Breve relación de la vida de la Madre Sor María Antonia de el Espíritu Santo Maldonado, religiosa de velo negro en el convento de la M. S. Clara de la ciudad de Querétaro, Condumex, Ms. Fondo 138–1, Siglo XVIII. Sor María and her sister learned how to play the organ and the bass, respectively, to enter the convent.
- 33 AGN, BN, Leg. 156, exp. 36; Sigüenza y Góngora, commenting on the foundation of the convent of Jesús María, acknowledged that the first thing a convent asked from an aspirant was the dowry. See his *Parayso Occidental*, 5. As time passed, receiving girls without dowries became almost impossible, even though it may have been part of the convent's legal agreements. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Santa Isabel in Mexico City had to abandon its policy of receiving girls without dowries on behalf of a founding patron due to financial penury. AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fol. 328 ff.; Vol. 105, fol. 328, 104.
- 34 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 5–18, AGI, Mexico, 809.
- 35 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 21–22, 35–36. In 1580 there were ten novices and ten “*pupilas*” or girls interned in the convent for shelter or education. For other examples, see AGN, BN, Leg. 213, Bundle 3. Entrance of María Tovar Campos, enjoying the funds donated by patron Buenaventura de Medina Picazo.
- 36 Asunción Lavrin, “Worlds in Contrast: Rural and Urban Confraternities in Mexico at the End of the Eighteenth Century.” In *The Church and Society in Latin America*, ed. Jeffrey E. Cole (New Orleans: Tulane University Center for Latin American Studies, 1982), 99–121. See also Cathedral de Mexico, Archivo del Cabildo, Borradores, 1730, 34, for eighteenth-century requests of endowments funded by the archbishopric.
- 37 P. Diego Calleja, S.J., *Vida de Sor Juana* (Mexico: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1936), 27. Her patron, D. Pedro Velázquez de la Cadena, belonged to one of the most powerful families in the city. His brother, Fr. Diego, was a powerful Augustinian friar. See Antonio Rubial García, *Una monarquía criolla. La provincia Agustina en el siglo XVIII* (Mexico: Conaculta, 1990).
- 38 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 460–61; See also AIPG, Blas de Silva, vol. 18 (1774), will of Salvador Antonio Verdún.
- 39 Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, passim; Aviad M. Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country. Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Michael Goodich, “The Contours of Female Piety in Medieval Hagiography,” *Church History* 50.1 (March 1981): 20–32; Darcy Donahue, “Writing Lives: Nuns and Confessors as Auto/Biographers in Early Modern Spain,” *Journal of Hispanic Philology*, 13.3 (Spring 1989): 230–39; T. C. Price Zimmerman, “Confession and Autobiography in the Early Renaissance.” In *Renaissance. Studies in Honor of Hans Baron*, ed. Anthony Molho and John A Tedeschi (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), 121–39; Elizabeth Spearing, coord., *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).
- 40 See, for example, Caroline White, *Early Christian Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1998). Among Mexican women writers the main sources of inspiration were the lives of saints such as the *Flos Sanctorum*, and the works of Saint Theresa in Spain, and Saint Catherine of Siena. Kristine Ibsen points out many passages in which such biographies or autobiographies resembled the lives of notable predecessors. See Ibsen, *Women's Spiritual Autobiography*, 62–71.
- 41 See Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas. La escritura femenina en la espiritualidad barroca novohispana. Siglos XVII y XVIII* (Mexico: Universidad de las Américas/Archivo General de la Nación, 2002); Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, *A Wild Country Out in the Garden. The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Asunción Lavrin, “La vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: Biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 3.4 (1993): 27–52.
- 42 For an analysis of the writing technique of a popular early-eighteenth-century hagiographer in Michoacán, see Luz del Carmen Vallarta, “Voces sin sonido: José Eugenio Ponce de León y su modelo de mujer religiosa,” *Relaciones* 45 (Winter 1990): 33–59.
- 43 Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, passim.
- 44 Joseph Bellido, S.J., *Vida de la M.R.M. María Anna Aguada de San Ignacio, primera priora del religiosísimo convento de Dominicas recoletas de Santa Rosa de la Puebla de los Angeles* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Mexicana, 1758). María Anna de Aguilar Velarde was the daughter of Pedro de la Cruz y Aguilar, from Cádiz and Micaela Velarde, Mexican. See also Fr. Juan de Villasánchez, *Justas y debidas honras que hicieron y hacen sus propias obras a la M.R.M. María Anna Aguada de San Ignacio . . . en las exequias que hizo el Illmo. Sr. Dr. Don Domingo Pantaleón Alvarez de Abreu* (Mexico: Reimpreso en la Imprenta de la Biblioteca Americana, 1758?).
- 45 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country Out in the Garden*, 259–60.
- 46 Gaspar González de Candamo, *Sermón en la solemne profesión de . . . Sor Juana María de Guadalajara (Doña Juana María Josefa Sánchez Leñero) en el monasterio de religiosas Dominicas de Santa María de Gracia de Guadalajara* (Guadalajara: Oficina de M. Valdés Téllez Girón, 1797).
- 47 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country Out in the Garden*, 3–62, 259–60; Fr. Sebastián de Santander y Torres, *Vida de la venerable Madre María de S. Joseph, religiosa Agustina recoleta, fundadora en los conventos de Santa Mónica de la ciudad de Puebla y después en el de la Soledad de Oaxaca* (Mexico: Viuda de Miguel Rivera, 1723).

48 UT, NLBC, Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena, monja profesá del convento de Sr. S. Gerónimo de la ciudad de Mexico, hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio, y de Isabel Muñoz, su legítima muger. Ms. Hereafter cited as Vida. See fol. 4.

49 Andrés Martín Melquíades, *Los recogidos. Nueva visión de la mística española* (1500–1700) (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1975).

50 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 227–34. Her father was a pious man who encouraged her vocation, and she had also been in the hands of confessors since an early age.

51 AINAH, Colección Gómez Orozco, Catálogo General Menológico y Tablas muy Curiosas formado por Fr. Felipe Hernando de Gracia, Ms. passim.

52 Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España*, 395, 396, 398. For examples of sisters professing in other convents, see 124, 125 126, 128, 129, 130, 430.

53 Alicia Bazarte Martínez, Enrique Tovar Esquivel, and Martha A. Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo (1598–1867)* (Mexico Instituto Politécnico Nacional, 2001), 153–54.

54 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 277, 287, 291, 297, 300; Rosalva Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Angeles del siglo XVIII* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2000), 209–13, 215, 218–22; Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns. The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44–50.

55 Loreto López, *Los conventos*, 216. The Bringas de Manzaneda family had seven sisters in Santa Clara de Jesus, Querétaro. See Fr. Diego Bringas de Manzaneda y Encinas, *Sermones Panegíricos y Morales* (Mexico: Herederos del Lic. D. Joseph de Jáuregui, 1792) 249–266.

56 Antonio Rubial García, “Monjas y mercaderes: Comercio y construcciones conventuales en la ciudad de México durante el siglo XVII,” *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* (Fall 1998): 363–85.

57 María Concepción Amerlinck de Corsi and Manuel Ramos Medina, *Conventos de monjas. Fundaciones en el Mexico Virreinal* (Mexico: Codumex, 1995), 109–15.

58 Ibid., 98–102; Muriel, *Conventos de monjas*, 109.

59 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 829, The letters of Sor Bernarda to Doña Ana Francisca de Zúñiga y Córdoba are mixed with the papers of the foundation of the Convent of San Joaquín and Santa Anna of Puebla.

60 Asunción Lavrin, “La celda y el siglo: Epístolas conventuales.” In *Mujer y cultura en la colonial Hispanoamericana*, Ed. Mabel Moraña. (Pittsburg: Biblioteca de América; Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 1996), 139–59.

61 J.M. Marroqui, *La ciudad de Mexico*, 3 vols. (Mexico: Tip. Y Lit. “La Europea,” 1900–03), 2:82; Joseph de la Vega, *Oración espiritual a Sor María Francisca, novicia desde cinco años en el religiosísimo convento de San Felipe de Jesús de religiosas Capuchinas de esta ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de B. Calderón, 1691).

62 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 452. Sor Ignacia de Santa Gertrudis, of Regina Coeli, Mexico, had had a sister and a niece living with her since they were very small. In 1748 she asked permission to use a bigger cell, since her sister wished to become a nun and her niece showed vocation. AGN, BN, Leg. 214, Bundle 3, no number.

63 Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*; Juan de Robles, S.J., *Oración fúnebre, elogio sepulcral en el aniversario de la muy ilustre señora y venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*.

64 Bazarte, Tovar Esquivel, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo*, 150–72.

65 Juan Benito Díaz de Gamarra y Dávalos, *Ejemplar de religiosas. Vida de la muy reverenda madre Sor María Lino de la S.S. Trinidad* (Mexico: Imp. Alejandro Valdez, 1831).

66 Juan Antonio de Mora: *Espejo crystalino de paciencia y viva imagen de Christo crucificado en la admirable vida y virtudes de la venerable madre Sor María Inés de los Dolores* (Mexico: Imprenta Real del superior Gobierno de los Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel de Rivera Calderón, 1729), 20.

67 José A. Ponce de León, *La Azucena entre espinas representada en la vida y virtudes de la V. Madre Luisa de Santa Catarina* (Mexico: Imp. del Real Colegio de San Ildefonso, 1756), 7, 18, 40; Luz del Carmen Vallarta, “Voces sin sonido: José Eugenio Ponce de León y su modelo de mujer religiosa,” 33–57.

68 BN Mexico, Cartas en las cuales manifiesta a su confesor las cosas interiores y exteriores de su vida la V.M. Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la SS Trinidad, religiosa de velo negro del convento de S. Juan de la Penitencia de la ciudad de Mexico, Ms.; Ignacio Saldaña, *La penitente paloma o gemebunda maya. Sermón fúnebre en las exequias de Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima. Trinidad del convento de San Juan de la Penitencia* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca, 1758). On Fr. Antonio Margil, see Isidro Félix de Espinosa, *El Peregrino Septentrional, Atlante delineado de la ejemplarísima vida del venerable Padre Antonio Margil de Jesús* (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1737). On his influence on pious women, see Ellen Gunnarsdottir, “Una visionaria barroca de la provincia Mexicana: Francisca de los Angeles (1674–1744).” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 205–62.

69 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 449.

70 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 8.

71 AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 212. Opúsculos Históricos. Notas sobre el convento de Sta. Clara, de la Villa de Carrión, Valle de Atrisco. See Sor Leonor de San Iván, Sor Isabel de San Gregorio, and Sor Catalina de San Iván. This convent was always poor and it is not too risky to think that some of these girls dedicated to God came from poor families. See also Franco, *Segunda parte*, 447 for Sor Inés de San Juan, a Dominican nun whose parents dedicated her to God when she was five years old.

72 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 114

73 On precocious “sainthood” or piety, see Cristina Ruiz Martínez, “La moderación como prototipo de santidad: Una imagen de la niñez.” In *De la santidad a la perversión: O de por que no se cumplía la ley de Dios en la sociedad novohispana*, ed. Sergio Ortega (Mexico: Enlace-Grijalbo, 1985), 49–66.

74 UT, NLBC, Anonymous, Sermon Sobre María Teresa de la Santísima Trinidad, Ms. (G 28); Alonso Calvo, S.J., *Compendio de las ejemplares vidas del P. José de Guevara de la Compañía y de Jesús y de tía la Sra. Doña Leocadia González Aranzamendi* (Madrid, 1754); P. Antonio de Siria, S.J., *Vida admirable y prodigiosas virtudes de la V. Sierva de Dios, D. Anna Guerra de Jesús* (Guatemala: por el Br. Antonio de Velasco, 1716).

75 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 488. Animals are rarely mentioned as part of daily life, let alone in terms of loving them.

76 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, copiada por una religiosa brígida en 1844. Ms. fol. 12–14.

77 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 460.

78 Silvia Arrom, *The Women of Mexico City, 1790–1857* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 53–97.

79 White-veiled nuns had to do physical labor at the convent. There was less emphasis on prayer and piety.

80 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 304–5

81 BN, Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fols. 36–38. For another example of a father’s opposition to profession of a marriageable daughter who was promised in marriage at age eleven, see José María Munibe, *Carta edificante que descubre la vida religiosa y ejemplares virtudes de la R.M. Inés Josefa del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús de la nueva fundación de esta corte, la que escribe su director a la M.R.M. priora y demás señoras religiosas de dicho convento* (Mexico, 1805).

82 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fol. 56.

83 Calvo, *Compendio de las ejemplares vidas*. The story of her life is in a “letter” written by Sor María Teresa, Abbess of the Capuchins of Puebla in 1733. It has its own pagination in the imprint. See p. 19 on the marriage proposal.

84 Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroicas de la Madre María de Jesús, religiosa profesa en el convento de la Limpia Concepción de la Virgen María N. Señora de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Viuda de Bernardo Calderón, 1676).

85 She was not the only daughter disinherited for following a vocation. Gerónima de la Trinidad, who became beata of the Dominican Third Order, displeased her parents so intensely with her decision not to accept her suitors that they threw her out of the house and disinherited her. See Franco, *Segunda parte*, 362–63.

86 Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida. Hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (Mexico: UNAM, 1999).

87 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 91.

88 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido en el Santo Carmelo Mexicano. Mina rica de ejemplos y virtudes en la historia de los Carmelitas descalzos en la provincia de Nueva España* (Mexico: Probusa-UIA, 1984), 313.

89 Juan Antonio Rodríguez, *Vuelos de la paloma. Oración fúnebre en las honras que celebró el religiosísimo convento de S. José de Gracia de señoras pobres Capuchinas de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro, a su M.R.M abadesa fundadora, Sor Marcela de Estrada y Escobedo, el día 1 de Mayo de 1728* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel Ribera, 1731).

90 See Juan José de Eguiara y Eguren, *La mujer edificativa. Panegirico fúnebre en las honras de la M.R. Madre Augustina Nicolasa María, abadesa tercera vez que fue del convento de San Felipe de Jesús, y pobres Capuchinas de esta ciudad* (Mexico: Imp. Nueva de la Bibliotheca Mexicana 1755).

91 Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 216–17.

92 *Memorias de Sor Mariana, fundadora y abadesa del monasterio de religiosas Capuchinas* (Mexico: María Fernández de Jauregui, 1808).

93 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fols. 29 through 53.

94 Fr. Miguel Rodríguez, *Memorial ajustado de la vida y virtudes de la M.R.M. Sor Antonia del Señor San Joaquín, religiosa profesa en el convento de Santa Clara de Sena*. (Mexico: Imp. de los herederos de María de Ribera, 1760).

95 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 64.

96 Margaret Sayers Peden, trans., *A Woman of Genius. The Intellectual Autobiography of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Salisbury, CT: Lime Rock Press, Inc., 1982), 30–31. “And so I entered the religious order, knowing that life there entailed certain conditions . . . most repugnant to my nature; but given the total antipathy I felt for marriage, I deemed convent life the least unsuitable and the most honorable I could elect.”

97 P. Diego Calleja, *Vida de Sor Juana*, 24.

98 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp. 13 through 18; Leg. 100, exp. 16, 17, 18, 19, 49; Leg. 156, exp. 2 through 11.

99 Fr. Dionisio Casado, *Sermón que en la profesión religiosa que en el convento de la Encarnación de Mexico hizo . . . la R.M. Sor María Genara de Santa Teresa* (Mexico, 1806). Fr. Dionisio raised the issue of parents who forced the vocation of their daughters, leading them into the cloisters against their wills. See 7–8. However, one sermon cannot be used as “proof” that this was a common happening. More likely, this was an advisory statement.

100 All information in this case is found in Jorge E. Traslosheros H., “Los motivos de una monja: Sor Feliciano de San Francisco. Valladolid de Michoacán, 1630–1655,” *Historia Mexicana* XLVII. 4 (1998): 735–63.

101 BN, FF, Box 76, Leg. 1285 (1790–1810).

102 Ana Catalina Gutiérrez, Tulane University, Viceregal and Ecclesiastical Mexican Collection, Box 119, Leg. 62, exp. 2; AGN, BN, Leg. 102. The story is entirely based on these documents.

CHAPTER TWO

EPIGRAPH: BN Mexico. Vida de la Madre María Marcela Soria religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, copiada por una religiosa brígida en 1844, Ms. fol. 71.

1 Biographies and autobiographies of nuns provide ample evidence of these internal rifts. See, for example, Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroicas de la Madre María de Jesús, religiosa profesada en el convento de la Limpia Concepción de la Virgen María N. Señora, de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Vda. De Bernardo Calderón, 1676), 81–85v; Carta escrita por la señora Sor María Teresa, abadesa del convento de Capuchinas de la ciudad de la Puebla de los Angeles dando noticias de . . . la vida y virtudes de . . . Sor María Leocadia, fundadora. In Alonso Calvo, S.J., *Compendio de las ejemplares vidas del P. José de Guevara de la Compañía de Jesús y de su tía, la Sra. Doña Leocadia González Aranzamendi* (Madrid: S.N., 1754), 34–35; BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela Soria religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, copiada por una religiosa brígida en 1844, Ms. fol. 107 and following.

2 AINAH, FF, Vol. 104, fol. 170, ff. Her mother was of Spanish descent, and she had a brother who was a priest and whose own ordination had not been scrutinized by any authority.

3 Alicia Bazarte Martínez, Enrique Tovar Esquivel, and Martha A. Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo (1598–1867)* (Mexico: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, 2001), 50–52.

4 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp. 15, 16, 17, 18.

5 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp. 16; LC, Richard Monday Collection, Reel 9, Vol. 11, Professions of Blasa Ceniceros in the convent of Santa Inés (1682) and Luisa de Salcedo in the convent of Nuestra Señora de Balvanera (1696).

6 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fol. 41.

7 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 116. See also AGN, BN, Leg. 100, exp. 16, 17 18, 19.

8 AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 36, Peticiones de ingreso de novicias al convento de San José de Carmelitas, fol. 3. She entered the convent on April 29, 1693. This source records the age of only four novices: two were 16, one 15, and one 25 years old. See also AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp. 12 through 18.

9 AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 36, passim; Rosalva Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Angeles del siglo XVIII* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2000), 203–7; Bazarte Martínez, Tovar Esquivel, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo*, 21–25.

10 AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 36, Peticiones de ingreso, passim. All information on this topic is drawn from this source.

11 Pardo, *Vida y virtudes*, 5. This gives an average of three nuns per year. In 1673, there were 114 nuns.

12 Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Editorial Santiago, 1946) 121–32. See also, Gobierno del Ilustrísimo Sr. D. Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, 1766–1722. Condumex, Fondo CIX-I, Ms. In 1767, 48 women either entered as novices or professed in the convents under diocesan jurisdiction.

13 Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos*, 169–78.

14 Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns. The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 187. For La Purísima Concepción of San Miguel el Grande, see 185.

15 See Chapter 9 for attempts to change the form of observance.

16 Manuel Romero de Terreros, *Bocetos de la vida social de la Nueva España* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1944), 226.

17 Sor María Dolores Rivera y San Román, *Noticias históricas de la fundación del convento de religiosas Dominicanas de Santa María la Gracia de Guadalajara* (Guadalajara: Lit. Tip. Ancira 1924). For the ceremony at the convent of San Jerónimo, Puebla, see Alicia Bazarte Martínez and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, *El convento de San Jerónimo en Puebla de los Angeles. Crónicas y testimonios* (Puebla: Litografía Magno Graf, S.A. de C.V., 2000), 197–208. The ceremonial of San Jerónimo in Mexico City is described in Bazarte, Tovar, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo*, 59–66.

18 Kathleen Myers and Amanda Powell, ed. and trans., *A Wild Country Out in the Garden. The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 62–67.

19 Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fol. 59–60. Sor María Marcela Soria professed as a novice on July 24, 1748, and took the final profession on January 9, 1750. She died in 1775.

20 Juan Benito Díaz de Gamarra y Dávalos, *Ejemplar de religiosas. Vida de la muy reverenda madre Sor María Josefa Lino de la Santísima Trinidad* (Mexico: Imp. de Alejandro. Valdés, 1831), 27.

21 AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fols. 186–87.

22 Miguel Sánchez, *Sermón que predicó el bachiller M. Sánchez en las exequias de la Madre Ana de la Presentación, del convento de San*

Laurencio [sic] (Mexico: Imp. Francisco Salvago, 1636), 356. He also eulogized her fairness as an abbess, always in the center of her flock and never engaging in any special friendship.

[23](#) Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos y poderosos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnífico real convento de Jesús María de Mexico* [1684] (Mexico: UNAM-Conдумex, 1995), 196.

[24](#) Calvo, *Compendio de las ejemplares vidas*. Sor Leocadia’s life was written by Sor María Teresa, abbess of the Capuchin convent of Puebla, in a letter she sent to the bishop-elect of Puebla. Sor Leocadia lived to the ripe age of eighty-two, dying in 1729. On her penitential acts, she said: “God wished to shape a nun truly a daughter of His wounds.”

[25](#) BN Madrid, Carta espiritual anónima a la hermana Doña María Josefa, 1774, Ms. 3534, fol. 126.

[26](#) Ibid., fol. 126.

[27](#) BN Madrid, Los Puntos de la Regla que han de guardar las sorores del convento de N.P.S. Bernardo de Mexico, Ms. 8135 (1744).

[28](#) Puntos de la Regla, no pagination.

[29](#) AINAH, Colección Gómez Orozco, Vol. 30, Directorio para las novicias de este convento de S. Phelipe de Jesús y pobres Capuchinas de Mexico, Ms. Por el Padre Cayetano Antonio de Torres, director espiritual del convento.

[30](#) BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fols. 164–66

[31](#) Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 189–94.

[32](#) Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 136–39.

[33](#) BN Mexico, Vida de la M. María Marcela, Ms., fols. 61–62.

[34](#) AGI, Mexico, 829; Asunción Lavrin, “La celda y el siglo: Epístolas conventuales.” In *Mujer y cultura en la colonia Hispanoamericana*, ed. Mabel Moraña (Pittsburgh: Biblioteca de América; Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 1996), 139–59.

[35](#) AGI, Mexico, 829.

[36](#) AGI, Mexico, 828. Retes was a wealthy merchant and silver dealer. See Louisa Schell Hoberman, *Mexico’s Merchant Elite, 1590–1660. Silver, State and Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 174–80.

[37](#) AGI, Mexico, 828.

[38](#) Ibid.

[39](#) Ibid.

[40](#) Ibid.

[41](#) Pardo, *Vida y virtudes*, 23v. See also Fr. Félix de Jesús María, *Vida y virtudes y dones sobrenaturales de la Venerable Sierva de Dios, Sor María de Jesús, religiosa profesada en el V. Monasterio de la Inmaculada Concepción de la Puebla de los Angeles en las Indias Occidentales* (Roma: Imprenta de Josepha y Felipe de Rossi, 1756).

[42](#) José L. Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1988), 245–48.

[43](#) José María Munibe, *Carta edificante que descubre la vida religiosa, y ejemplarísimas virtudes de la R.M. Inés Josefa del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús de la nueva fundación de esta corte, la que escribe su director a la M.R.M. priora y demás señoras religiosas de dicho convento* (Mexico: Imp. de Fernández Jáuregui, 1805), 15.

[44](#) Fr. Ignacio Saldaña, *La Penitente Paloma o gemebunda Maya. Sermón fúnebre en las exequias de . . . la venerable madre Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca, 1758).

[45](#) Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Santiago de Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España* [1645] (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900), 452.

[46](#) AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 816, exp. 34.

[47](#) Fr. Antonio Arbiol, O.F.M., *La religiosa instruída con doctrina de la Sagrada Escritura y Santos Padres de la Iglesia Católica. Para todas las operaciones de su vida regular, desde que recibe el santo hábito hasta la hora de su muerte* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Causa de la V.M. María de Jesús de Agreda, 1753).

[48](#) See Chapter 4.

[49](#) AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 816, exp. 34.

50 See Chapters 3 and 7 for chastity and sexuality.

51 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo del muy religioso convento de San José, de religiosas Carmelitas descalzas de la ciudad de los Angeles Puebla* (Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Puebla/Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992), 65, 158. Only one dismissal was registered in the convents under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Mexico between 1766 and 1772. See Gobierno del Ilustrísimo Sr. D. Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, Ms. Condumex Fondo CIX-I.

52 AGN, BN, Leg. 146, No. 72; Manuel Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas fundaciones femeninas Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997), 297, 306, 308, 309, 394, 395.

53 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 275.

54 AINAH, FF, Vol. 95. Corpus Christi had serious racial problems in its beginnings due to the fact that a Franciscan Provincial began to accept white novices, against the spirit of the founder's wishes. See Chapter 8.

55 See Chapter 8.

56 BN Mexico, Sor Sebastiana María Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas Espirituales. Ms., fol. 114. See also, Josefina Muriel, *Cultura femenina novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1994), 416–32.

57 BN Madrid, Los Puntos de la Regla que han de guardar las sorores del convento de N.P.S. Bernardo de Mexico, Ms. For a complete record of all the paperwork pertaining to the first and final profession, see the process of Doña Blasa Cenicerros' application to the convent of Santa Inés in 1682. LC, Monday Collection, Reel 9, Vol. 11. Other examples are also available in this source.

58 Sor María Dolores Rivera y San Román, *Noticias históricas*: 30. This convent used green beans (*habas*) for admission; beans for rejection, and chick peas for abstention.

59 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 122.

60 Asunción Lavrin, "Indian Brides of Christ: Creating New Spaces for Indigenous Women in New Spain," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 15.2 (Summer 1999): 225–60.

61 AGN, BN, Leg. 719, exp. 4. This profession took place in 1766 and there were two other professants in that year. For other examples, see AGN, BN, Leg. 85 for the convent of La Concepción; Leg. 100, exp. 16, 17, 18, 19 for the convent of San Lorenzo in the first quarter of the eighteenth century; Leg. 156 for San Bernardo in the mid-eighteenth century; Leg. 310 for Corpus Christi; Leg. 1025 for Santa Clara in Mexico City.

62 LC, Monday Collection, Reel 9, Vol. 11, Professions of Blasa de Cenicerros (1683) and Luisa de Salcedo (1692); Bazarte Martínez, Tovar Esquivel, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo*, 64–66.

63 AGN, BN, Leg. 49; Leg. 66. As an example, this source contains testaments of the mid-eighteenth century. There are hundreds of testaments in this repository as well as in provincial archives and notarial archives.

64 The dowry demanded for profession was much higher than the dowries given to the daughters of common artisans and small merchants. Charitable dowries for poor girls were 300 pesos, while a regular nun dowry was ten times that sum, and even more in the eighteenth century.

65 Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto monja profesora de velo negro y hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta de Antuerpia de los Herederos de la Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1689), 7; *Vida de Sor Mariana J. Nepomuceno* (Mexico, 1808), 21. Female solidarity was behind the cession of a dowry to another woman seeking profession. María de Ocampo, the recipient of a dowry of 300 pesos from a confraternity for either profession or marriage, ceded the money to Sor Josefa Rita del Santísimo Rosario, a novice in San Juan de la Penitencia with an incomplete dowry. See AGN, BN, Leg. 1025, No. 5 (1773). See also, Bazarte Martínez, Tovar Esquivel, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo*, 43–54; Rosalva Loreto López, "La caridad y sus personajes: Las obras pías de Don Diego Sánchez Peláez y Doña Isabel de Herrera Peregrina. Puebla, Siglo XVIII." In *Cofradías, capellanías y obras pías en la América colonial*, coord. Pilar Martínez López-Cano, Gisela von Wobeser, and Juan Guillermo Muñoz (Mexico: UNAM, 1998), 263–80; Asunción Lavrin, "Cofradías novohispanas: Economías material y espiritual." In Lopez-Cano, von Wobeser, and Muñoz, *Cofradías, capellanías y obras pías en la América colonial*, 49–64.

66 AGN, BN, Leg. 49, exp. 4, exp. 16.

67 AIPG, notary García de Argomanes, Vol. 35 (1736), fol. 115. See also fols. 127, 159, 194. This notary was in charge of the business of the convent of Santa Mónica. In the 1770s, Blas de Silva was the convent's notary. Their books offer many examples of nuns' wills. On the issue of women's patronage, see Edith Couturier, "'For the Greater Service of God.' Opulent Foundations and Women's Philanthropy in Colonial Mexico." In *Lady Bountiful Revisited. Women, Philanthropy and Power*, ed. Kathleen D. McCarthy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 119–41. See also Nuria Salazar Simarro, "Monjas y benefactores." In *Memoria del II Congreso Internacional El Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español. Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995): 193–212.

68 AGN, Tierra y Aguas, Vol. 387, exp. 5 (1720–32). The majordomo of La Encarnación laid claim to part of a man's will. He had left a nun in the convent a charitable amount of 150 pesos annually. See also *El convento de religiosas de Santa Clara de Mexico [sobre bienes y derechos de] su M.R.M. abadesa actual Mariana de San Francisco* (Mexico: Felipe Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1782).

69 LC, Richard Monday Collection, Reel 9, Vol. II. Professions of Blasa de Cenicerros (1683) and Luisa de Salcedo (1692). "You will not parade in the

streets or go to anybody's house." "She will not be allowed to leave [the convent] under any pretext."

70 BN, FF, Box 75, 25 November, 1755.

71 AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 992.

72 Bazarte Martínez, Tovar Esquivel, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo*, 55–59. They quote the cost of one profession as 630 pesos, but indicate that the cost was higher because some expenses were not included in the accounts they used.

73 For a comparison between civilian and religious marriages, see Jorge René González Marmolejo, "Diferencias y similitudes entre los ritos del matrimonio espiritual y el matrimonio sacramental." In *Comunidades domésticas en la sociedad novohispana. Formas de unión y transmisión cultural Memoria del IV Simposio de Historia de las Mentalidades* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1994), 79–88.

74 *Orden que se ha de guardar con la que entra en religión y modo de que se ha de vestir el hábito de las religiosas de la Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Sra. y de San Gerónimo, sujetas al ordinario de este Arzobispado de Mexico* (Mexico, no date).

75 Antonio García Cubas, *El libro de mis recuerdos* (Mexico: Imp. de A. García Cubas, Hermanos y Sucesores, 1904), 13–16.

76 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, Ms. fol. 71–72.

77 Jesús Romero Flores, *Iconografía colonial* (Mexico: INAH/SEP, 1940); Josefina Muriel and Manuel Romero de Terreros, *Retratos de monjas* (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1952); Virginia Armella de Aspe, *Escudos de monjas novohispanas* (Mexico: Grupo Gutsa, 1993); Alma Montero Alarcón, "Ceremonias de profesión y muerte en los conventos femeninos novohispanos." In Bazarte Martínez and Tovar Esquivel, *El convento de San Jerónimo en Puebla*, 191–95.

78 José Manuel de Castro Santa-Anna, *Diario de sucesos notables*, vol. 4. In *Documentos para la Historia de Mexico*, 4 vols. (Mexico: Imprenta de Juan R. Navarro 1853–57), 10.

79 Brian Larkin, "The Splendor of Worship: Baroque Catholicism Religious Reform, and Last Wills and Testaments in Eighteenth Century Mexico City," *Colonial Latin American Review* 8.4 (Fall 1999): 405–42.

80 Felipe Montalvo, *Místico Vaso de Santidad y Honor. Sermón de la seraphica madre y esclarecida virgen Santa Clara, que en su fiesta de su convento de religiosas de esta corte, 12 de Agosto de 1748, predicó, el Rev. Felipe Montalvo* (Mexico: Doña Maria de Ribera, 1748). The number of sermons on the professions of nuns is too large to be fully acknowledged here and some examples will be listed in the bibliography. There is no study of this specific genre. As an example, see Fr. Antonio de Barbosa. *Triunfo glorioso de la cruz, . . . en la solemne profesión, que hizo la R.M. Feliciana de la Asunción, religiosa Dominica del convento observantisimo de Santa María de Gracia de la ciudad, y corte de Guadalajara, el día diez y seis de Julio de este año de 1730* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel Rivera Calderón, 1730). This sermon was paid by Don Estevan Gómez Trujillo, *alcalde* of the city and familiar of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, who dedicated it to Saint Rosalía of Palermo.

81 Fr. Juan de Ávila, *Pureza emblemática discurrida en la profession de la M. Mariana de San Francisco, religiosa de Santa Clara. Sermón* (Mexico: Doña María de Benavides, Vda. de Juan de Ribera, 1686).

82 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 383.

83 Avila, *Pureza emblemática*, 3.

84 Fr. José Antonio Plancarte, *Sermón de profesión . . . en la que hizo Sor María Antonia Ildefonsa . . . en el convento de San José de Gracia de reverendas madres Capuchinas* (Mexico: M.J. de Zúñiga, 1799); Fr. Juan Bautista Taboada, *Sermón panegírico . . . en las circunstancias de profesar la R.M. María Antonia Manuela de S. Francisco religiosa de velo negro en el convento real de Santa Clara de Jesús en la ciudad de Querétaro* (Mexico: Herederos de J. Guillena Carrascoso, 1720); Gaspar González de Candamo, *Sermón en la solemne profesión de . . . Sor Juana María de Guadalupe en el monasterio de religiosas Dominicas de Sta. María de Gracia de Guadalajara* (Guadalajara: Oficina de M. Valdés Téllez Girón, 1797); Joseph Ramírez de Aguilar, *Sermón en la profesión solemne que hizo Sor María Manuela de la Purificación . . . en el convento de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de la ciudad de Antequera* (Puebla, 1692); Nicolás de Jesús María, *El Christus ABC de la virtud, cartilla de la santidad. Sermón panegírico . . . en la solemne profesión . . . [de] la M. Ignacia Gertrudis de S. Pedro* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de F. Rodríguez Lupercio, 1726); Fr. Joseph de la Vega y Santa Bárbara, *Oración panegírica en la profesión solemne que en el real convento de Jesús María hizo . . . la R.M. María Ignacia de Jesús* (Mexico: Viuda de J.B. de Hogal, 1753).

85 Fr. Diego Bringas de Manzaneda y Encinas, "Plática pronunciada en el real convento de Sonta Clara de Jesús de esta ciudad de Querétaro en la profesion solemne . . . [de] la última de mis hermanas, Sor María de Jesús Bringas de Manzaneda y Encinas." In Fr. Diego Bringas de Manzaneda y Encinas, *Sermones Panegíricos y Morales* (Mexico: Herederos del Lic. D. Joseph de Jáuregui, 1792), 249–266. Sor María was the last of seven sisters to profess.

CHAPTER THREE

EPIGRAPH: Pedro Joseph Cesati, *Carta de el P. Pedro Joseph Cesati de la Compañía de Jesús a la Rda. Madre Maria Nicolasa de los Dolores, priora del convento de San Gerónimo de la ciudad de la Puebla, en que le da noticia de las virtudes de la M. Anna Maria de S. Joseph, religiosa del mismo convento* (Puebla de los Angeles, n.p., 1752), no pagination.

1 José Vergara y Bengochea, *El amor de María al estado religioso. Sermón panegírico que en la solemnidad de Ntra. Sra. del Carmen, y profesión de una religiosa, predicó en la iglesia del monasterio de Sta. Catharina de Sena en Mexico, el día 8 de Julio de 1771 el R.P. Fr. Joseph Vergara* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Mexicana de J. de Jáuregui, 1772), passim.

2 Antonio Núñez, S.J., *Cartilla de la doctrina religiosa para las niñas que desean ser monjas* (Mexico: Viuda de Ribera, 1708), 3v–10.

3 Diego Rodríguez de Rivas y Velasco, *Carta Pastoral que el Illmo. Sr. Dr. Diego Rodríguez de Rivas y Velasco escribió a las religiosas de su obispado de Guadalajara, con motivo de la real cédula expedida per S. M. en el real sitio de el Pardo a 19 de marzo de 1768.* (Guadalajara, n.p. 1768), passim.

4 Juan de Ortega y Montañés, *Reglas y Constituciones que por autoridad apostólica deben observar las religiosas Gerónimas del convento de San Lorenzo de Mexico* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de F. Rodríguez Lupercio, 1707); *Reglas y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de los conventos de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción y Santísima Trinidad, de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: M. de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1795).

5 Núñez, *Cartilla*, 7v; Andrés de Borda, *Práctica de confesores de monjas en que se explican los quatro [sic] votos de obediencia, pobreza, cassidad [sic] y clausura, por medio del diálogo* (Mexico: Francisco de Ribera Calderón, 1708), 23–30.

6 Inventories of late-seventeenth-century nuns show that wealthy nuns owned jewelry and a considerable amount of china and furniture. See AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

7 For personal and conventual property, see Chapter 5.

8 Francisco Javier Lizana Beaumont, *Carta Pastoral a las R.R.M.M. Superioras y Súbditas del Arzobispado de Mexico* (Mexico: Imprenta Madrileña, 1803), 6–7.

9 On the topic of virginity, see Clarissa Atkinson, “ ‘Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass’: The Ideology of Virginity in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983): 131–43; John Bugge, *Virginitas. An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1975); Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ. Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Sarah Salin, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28–34; Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

10 Núñez, *Cartilla*, 10–12v. No form of love was exempted, including love for parents or blood relatives.

11 Peter Brown, *The Body, Society, Men, Women, and Social Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000).

12 Laila Abdalla, “Theology and Culture: Masculizing the Woman.” In *Varieties of Devotion in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Susan Karant-Nunn, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, 7 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 23.

13 Fr. Dionisio Casado, *Sermón en la profesión religiosa que en el convento de la Encarnación de Mexico hizo la R.M. Sor María de Santa Teresa hija del Señor Félix Quijada y Ovejero* (Mexico: Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1806), 25–28; Núñez, *Cartilla*, 10; BN Madrid, Obispo Juan de Palafox, *Pastorales, Exhortaciones, etc.*, del Obispo de Puebla a las corporaciones religiosas. Copia notarial hecha en Roma, 20 septiembre 1769, Ms. 3877, fols. 5–6.

14 Fr. Nicolás Quiñones, *Explicación de la primera regla de la Madre Santa Clara de Asís, dispuesta para las religiosas descalzas del convento de Corpus Christi de esta ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1736), 51–55; Francisco Javier Lizana Beaumont, *Carta Pastoral*, 36–41.

15 BN Madrid, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Regla y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*. Ms. 3877, fol. 194v.

16 Fr. Diego Díaz, *Sermón que en la solemne profesión de la Madre María Magdalena de la Soledad predicó el padre predicador Fray Diego Díaz*. (Mexico: Vda. de Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1694), no pagination.

17 Juan Fernández Cejudo, *Llave de oro para abrir las puertas del cielo. La Regla y Ordenaciones de las monjas de la Inmaculada Concepción de Nuestra Señora la Madre de Dios* (Mexico: Imp. de María Fernández y Jáuregui, 1815), 66.

18 Lizana y Beaumont, *Carta Pastoral*, 41.

19 Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto . . . monja profesa de velo negro y hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta de Antuerpia de los Herederos de la Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1689), 4v; Juan Antonio Rodríguez, *Vuelos de la paloma. Oración fúnebre en las honras que celebró el religiosísimo convento de S. José de Gracia de señoras pobres Capuchinas de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro a su M.R.M. abadesa fundadora Sor Marcela de Estrada y Escobedo, el día 11 de Mayo de 1728* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel Ribera, 1731); Juan Antonio de Mora, *Espejo crystalino de paciencia y viva imagen de Christo crucificado en la admirable vida y virtudes de la venerable madre Sor María Inés de los Dolores* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de M. de Rivera y

Calderón, 1729), 23.

- 20 Joseph Bellido, *Vida de la V.M.R.M. María Anna Agueda de S. Ignacio, primera priora del religiosísimo convento de Dominicas recoletas de Santa Rosa de la Puebla de los Angeles* . . . (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Mexicana, 1758), 32; Mora, *Espejo crystalino*, 23; Juan Benito Díaz de Gamarra y Dávalos, *Ejemplar de religiosas, Vida de la muy reverenda madre Sor María Josefa Lino de la Santísima Trinidad*. (Mexico: Imp. de Alejandro Valdés, 1831), 6–7.
- 21 Miguel Ramón Pinilla, Ms. Breve relación de la vida de la Madre Sor María Antonia de el Espíritu Santo Maldonado, religiosa de velo negro en el convento de la M. S. Clara de la ciudad de Querétaro. Centro de Estudios Históricos Condumex, Mexico, Fondo 138–1, Siglo XVIII, no pagination.
- 22 Pedro Salmerón, *Vida de la venerable Madre Isabel de la Encarnación, Carmelita descalza natural de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1675), 14, 19v, 23.
- 23 Núñez, *Cartilla*, 12v–13v.
- 24 José María Gómez y Villaseñor, *Sermón predicado el día 3 de marzo de 1803 en la solemne profesión de religiosa de coro de Sor María Manuela de la Presentación* . . . hizo Doña María Manuela Fernández de Barrera y Vizcarra, en el observantísimo monasterio de Agustinas Recoletas de Santa Mónica de la ciudad de Guadalajara (Guadalajara: M. Valdés Téllez Girón, 1803), 15–16.
- 25 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries. Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 81–94.
- 26 Fr. Pedro de Borges, *Sermón que predicó el M.R. Fr. Pedro de Borges* . . . a la profesión de la Madre María de la Encarnación, religiosa descalza del convento de la gloriosa Santa Teresa de Jesús, de esta ciudad (Puebla: Vda. de Juan de Borja Gandia, 1673), 7v; Fr. Joseph Lanciego y Eguilaz, *Carta Pastoral* . . . que escribe a sus amadas hijas las religiosas de toda su filiación (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel de Ribera, 1716), 17.
- 27 Joyce E. Salisbury, *Iberian Popular Religion, 600 B.C. to 700 A.D.: Celts, Romans and Visigoths*, Texts and Studies in Religion, 20 (New York, Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), 116–31. The Rules of Saint Leander of Seville and other early Christian legislation ensured uniformity of life as nuns, and promoted the observance of vows in the ensuing centuries.
- 28 Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women. Periculoso and Its Commentators, 1298–1545* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1997), passim.
- 29 Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession. Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 157. Johnson states that French nunneries “often did not live by the theory of enclosure, a reality that was true of nuns in southern France as well as of their northern [Normandy] sisters.”
- 30 Approved in the Council of Trent, Chapter Five, session 25, as cited by Makowski, *Canon Law*, 128. See also Antonio Javier Pérez y López, *Teatro de Legislación Universal de España e Indias*, 28 vols. (Madrid: Imprenta de M. González, 1791–1798), 6:148.
- 31 *Estatutos y Constituciones de las hermanas sorores pobres, profesas de la primera regla de Santa Clara, que hizo Santa Coleta*. In Fr. Joseph de Castro, *Primera regla de la fecunda Madre Santa Clara de Assis* (Mexico: Herederos de Doña Maria de Rivera, 1756), 117.
- 32 Fr. José Antonio Plancarte, *Sermón de profesión en la que hizo Sor María Antonia Ildefonsa (en el siglo Doña María Ignacia de Rocha) en el convento de San José de Gracia de reverendas madres Capuchinas* (Mexico: M. J. de Zúñiga Ontiveros, 1799), 22; Juan Bautista Taboada, *Sermón panegírico. En la circunstancias de profesar la R.M. María Antonia Manuela de San Francisco, religiosa de velo negro en el convento real de Santa Clara de Jesús en la ciudad de Querétaro* . (Mexico, 1720).
- 33 Rodríguez de Rivas y Velasco, *Cartas Pastorales*, 20.
- 34 Joachin Antonio de Villalobos, *Sermón* . . . en la solemne profesión que hicieron en el convento de la Santísima Trinidad de la ciudad de los Angeles las Ilustres Señoras Sor María Gregoria de San Xavier y Sor María Anna de San Ignacio (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hoyal, 1728); Fr. Pedro de Borges, *Sermón* , 60; Fr. Diego Díaz, *Sermón que en la solemne profesión de la Madre María Magdalena de la Soledad*. (Mexico: Vda. de Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1694).
- 35 Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Puntos que el Señor Obispo de la Puebla de los Angeles, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza deja encargados y encomendados a las almas a su cargo al tiempo de partirse de estas provincias a los reynos de España* (Puebla: Impreso por el Bachiller Juan Blanco de Alcázar, n.d.), no pagination.
- 36 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, copiada por una religiosa brígida en 1844, Ms. fol. 199.
- 37 *Reglas y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de los conventos de Nuestra Sra. de la Concepción y Santísima Trinidad de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: M. de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1795), 1–35. These Rules used the originals given by seventeenth-century Bishop Juan de Palafox.
- 38 Borda, *Práctica de confesores*, 56–57; Antonio Muro Orejón, *Cedulario Americano del siglo XVIII* (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos-Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1956), 407.
- 39 Francisco Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias diocesanas* (Puebla: Imprenta del Real Seminario Palafoxiano, 1770), 314.

40 Mandatos de los Illmos. S.S. Arzobispos de Mexico a las religiosas del convento de la Encarnación de la misma ciudad. Ms. At the end of a copy of Juan Fernández Cejudo, *Llave de oro*. This manuscript recalled the orders of Archbishops Lorenzana and Núñez de Haro about the petty but constant transgressions they had noted in the convents of their diocese, such as frequent visits of family members, the presence of girls interned in the convent at the conventual doors; the substitution of a girl for a servant when the latter received a temporary permit to leave the convent; conversations with people in the lower coro, etc. To them, such incidents betrayed the vow of enclosure.

41 Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary. Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 383–426.

42 San Juan de la Cruz, *Subida del Monte Carmelo. Noche oscura, Cántico espiritual. Llama de amor viva* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1984). See “Cántico espiritual,” 257–369, and Antonio T. De Nicolás, *St. John of the Cross. Alchemist of the Soul* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weisner, Inc., 1996), 104–28. For an analysis of spirituality in Spain, see José L. Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria, 1988), 165–205. The theme of love of God is more universal than the specific love of Christ and his bride. On the love of God the best treatises of the sixteenth century were those of Fr. Luis de Granada. See his *Memorial de la vida cristiana*, Tratado Séptimo in Fr. Luis de Granada, *Obras Completas*, 13 vols., ed. Alvaro Huerga (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española/Dominicos de Andalucía, 1994), 5:289–344.

43 Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Las Moradas. Libro de su vida* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1979), 91, 94–95.

44 *Modo de pedir licencias de cada mes a Nuestra Señora la Virgen María en su Asunción gloriosa a los cielos, que como su prelada, piden la religiosas del convento de Señor San Lorenzo* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel Rivera, [177?]). This is evidently written by a woman, as the use of the possessive and adjectives denote the feminine gender.

45 Bellido, *Vida de la M.R.M. María Anna Agueda de S. Ignacio*, 32. Her love of God was later expressed in her works, *Maravillas del Divino Amor and Leyes de Amor Divino*. See Chapter 10.

46 Pláticas doctrinales, Universidad Iberoamericana, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Acervos Históricos, Ms. 95 to 95/50; Plancarte, *Sermón de profesión*, 13–14.

47 The preacher compared the veil to a triumphal flag. See Fr. Juan Antonio de Barbosa, *Triunfo Glorioso de la Cruz, que en la solemne profesión, que hizo la R.M. María Feliciano de la Asunción, religiosa Dominica del convento observantisimo de Santa María de Gracia de la ciudad y corte de Guadalajara* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel de Rivera Calderón, 1730), 9.

48 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos y poderosos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnífico real convento de Jesús María de Mexico* (Mexico: UNAM/Condumex, 1995), 78v, 87.

49 Bellido, *Vida*, 41–42, 127–128. The association of love with the flames of fire can also be found in Saint John of the Cross. Other nuns also experienced pains in the chest, attributed to intense religiosity. Sor Inés Josefa del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, in the words of her biographer, suffered intense heart pains during Holy Week. See José María Munibe, *Carta edificante que descubre la vida religiosa y ejemplares virtudes de la R.M. Inés Josefa del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús de la nueva fundación de esta corte, la que escribe su director a la M.R.M. priora y demás señoras religiosas de dicho convento*. (Mexico: Imp. de Fernández Jáuregui, 1805), no pagination.

50 María Dolores Bravo, *El discurso de la espiritualidad dirigida* (Mexico: UNAM, 2001), 41. Bravo explores the use of the metaphor of fire and the holocaust of self by Antonio Núñez de Miranda; Fr. Joseph de la Vega, *Oración espiritual a Sor María Francisca, novicia desde edad de cinco años en el religio-sissimo [sic] convento de San Phelipe de Jesús de religiosas Capuchinas de esta ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de B. Calderón, 1691), no pagination.

51 Juan Antonio Rodríguez, *Vuelos de la paloma. Oración fúnebre en las honras que celebró el . . . convento de S. Joseph de Gracia de señoras pobres Capuchinas . . . a su M.R.M. abadesa fundadora, Sor Marcela de Estrada y Escobedo* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel Rivera Calderón, 1731), no pagination.

52 Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Wood-brige, UK: The Boydell Press, 1992), 68–77. She notes an increase in the metaphors and images of love in the late Middle Ages

53 LC, Anonymous, 1758. Manuscript of Capuchin Nun, MM 59. The Diary is catalogued as anonymous, but it is the work of Sor María de Jesús Felipa, of the convent of San Juan de la Penitencia. See fols. 118–120. Hereafter cited as Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary; BN Mexico, Sor Maria Marcela, Vida, Ms. fols. 172, 160. On one occasion she saw God as a prince who, after walking in her interior world, feeling tired “fell in the arms of the soul, resting and enjoying himself with her.” Afterwards, “His Majesty took the soul in his arms and caressed it lovingly,” fol. 145. Since words are gendered in Spanish, the soul is feminine and the discourse lends itself to a representation of love as between male and female.

54 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, O.C.D., *Tesoro escondido en el santo Carmelo Mexicano. Mina rica de ejemplos y virtudes en la historia de los Carmelitas descalzos de la provincia de Nueva España* (Mexico: Probusa y Universidad Iberoamericana, 1984), 308. Sor Isabel de la Encarnación had a vision of Christ with the cross on Christmas day, and she “suddenly felt that Our Lord took her in his arms, giving her pleasure and celestial gifts, and then he returned her again to her tribulations.” See also 331.

55 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 153–64, 246–51.

56 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas en las cuales manifiesta a su confesor las cosas interiores y exteriores de su vida la V.M. Sebastiana Josepha de la S.S. Trinidad, religiosa de velo negro en el convento de S. Juan de la Penitencia de la ciudad de Mexico, fol. 238. Hereafter, Cartas espirituales.

57 Julián Gutiérrez Dávila, *Memorias históricas del oratorio de San Felipe de Neri* (Mexico: María de Ribera, 1736), Parte 2, Libro 2, Capítulo 19, 94.

58 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1969), 69–71. Also in Georgina Sabat de Rivers and Elías L. Rivers, eds., *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Obras selectas* (Barcelona: Editorial Noguer, S.A., 1976), 510–15.

59 Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Puntos*, 220 and following.

60 Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, *Varias devociones compuestas por la V. y M.R.M. Sor María Anna Agueda de S. Ignacio, priora y fundadora . . . de Santa Rosa de Santa María de esta ciudad . . .* (Puebla: Imprenta de Cristóbal Tadeo Ortega y Bonilla, 1758), 157. For further analysis of her works, see Chapter 10.

61 José María Gómez y Villaseñor, *Sermón predicado . . . en la solemne profesión . . . de Sr. María Manuela de la Presentación . . . en el observantísimo monasterio de Agustinas recoletas de Santa Mónica de la ciudad de Guadalajara . . .* (Guadalajara: M. Valdés Téllez Girón, 1803), 11; Fr. Dionisio Casado, *Sermón en la profesión Religiosa que en el convento de la Encarnación de Mexico hizo . . . la R.M. María Genara de Santa Teresa* (Mexico, 1806), 2, 12. Casado was of the opinion that love for parents should not be forgotten but *subordinated* to that for God.

62 Pedro Salmerón, *Vida de la venerable Madre Isabel de la Encarnación, Carmelita descalza* (Mexico: Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1675), 39.

63 Cesati, *Carta de el P. Pedro Joseph Cesati*, 6–7; Cesati, Sor Anna María’s confessor, tells about the nun’s lack of confidence in her worth as the bride of Christ. “What is the use of being a religious if I do not know how to be a faithful bride of Christ?” The confessor found no fault in her observance.

64 Stephen Haliczzer, *Between Exaltation and Infamy. Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213–40.

65 Fr. Joseph Lanciego y Eguilaz, *Carta Pastoral*, 3.

66 Fr. Luis de Granada, *Obras Completas* 1, *Libro de la oración y meditación*, passim; Teresa de Avila *Libro de su vida* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), 28–125; San Ignacio de Loyola, *Ejercicios Espirituales de San Ignacio de Loyola* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1986).

67 Granada, *Obras Completas*, 1, *Libro de la oración*, 271–87. Vol. 5 contains his *Memorial de la vida cristiana*, a great part of which is devoted to understanding devotion and prayer.

68 Granada, *Obras Completas*, 5, *Memorial de la vida cristiana*, 21.

69 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

70 Granada, *Memorial de la vida cristiana*, 5, 145–49.

71 Philip Sheldrake, S.J., *The Way of Ignatius Loyola. Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises* (London: SPCK, 1991), 24. The essays in this work are helpful in explaining the theory and practice of the exercises.

72 BN, Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela. See fols. 4, 75, 80, 202; Asunción Lavrin, “María Marcela Soria: Una Capuchina Querétana.” In *Diálogos espirituales. Letras femeninas Hispanoamericanas. Siglos XVI-XIX*, ed. Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López. (Puebla: Universidad de las Américas / Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2005), 84.

73 *Escuela de el Sagrado Corazón de Jesús para sus amantes esposas . . .* (Puebla: Viuda de Miguel Ortega, 1754), no pagination.

74 AINAH, Colección Paso y Troncoso, Cuarta Serie, Leg. 76, Doc. 8; *Memorias de Sor Mariana, fundadora y abadesa del monasterio de religiosas Capuchinas* (Mexico: María Fernández de Jauregui, 1808), 34. See also AINAH, Colección Gómez Orozco, Vol. 30. Cayetano Antonio de Torres, Directorio para las novicias de este convento de S. Felipe de Jesús y Pobres Capuchinas de Mexico, Ms. fols. 367 and following.

75 Universidad Iberoamericana Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Acervos Históricos. “Obras espirituales,” Ms. 30. Pueblan Sor María Agueda de San Ignacio also kept an account of her prayers. According to her biographer she had said 5,400 times a salutation to Christ: “I salute my chosen husband, owner of my heart, for all the offenses he suffered for me.” See Bellido, *Vida de la M.R.M. María Anna Agueda de S. Ignacio*, 220.

76 Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 168–69; Juan de Robles, *Oración fúnebre elogio sepulcral en el aniversario de la muy ilustre señora y venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto, religiosa profesada de velo negro en el observantísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús en la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1685), 3.

77 Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroicas de la Madre María de Jesús, religiosa profesada en el convento de la Limpia Concepción de la Virgen María Na. Señora de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Vda. de Bernardo de Calderón, 1676), 62–65.

78 *Ejercicios de los desagrvios de Christo Señor Nuestro, que usan las religiosas del Máximo Doctor San Gerónimo de la ciudad de la Puebla de los Angeles* (Puebla: Colegio Real de S. Ignacio, 1767), no pagination.

79 *Ejercicios de los desagrvios*, no pagination.

80 The Rosary is a prayer of 150 Hail Marys with one Our Father between each ten, and meditations on the life of Christ. See Anne Winston-Allen,

Stories of the Rose. The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages (University Park Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Universidad Iberoamericana Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, *Acervos Históricos*. “Obras espirituales.” Ms. 257–82; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1969), 995–1024.

81 These concepts had their roots in the fourth and fifth centuries. See Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 55–65, 128–36.

82 Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience*, 141–43.

83 Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)*, Vol. 4 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 155–67.

84 Fr. Luis de Granada, *Obras Completas*, 1, *Libro de la oración*, 271–87.

85 Of the Spanish nun Sor María de Jesús de Agreda, her biographer, Fr. José Ximénez Samaniego, wrote that with divine assistance, all her endeavors were to purge her faults, and to purify her senses and spirit by embracing the cross with as many discomforts and penitence as were permitted by obedience. See Fray José Ximénez Samaniego, *Relación de la vida de la venerable madre Sor Maria de Jesús* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Causa de la Venerable Madre, 1755), 47. Mother Agreda’s writings were well-known in Mexican convents.

86 See Alonso Calvo, S.J., *Compendios de ejemplares vidas del P. José Guevara, de la Cía. De Jesús y de su tía la Sra. Da. Leocadia González Aranzamendi, naturales de la imperial ciudad de Mexico* (Madrid, 1754), 46–48. The life of Sor Leocadia, professed in Mexico and founder of the Capuchins of Puebla, was first written by Sor María Teresa, Abbess of the Puebla Capuchins for Bishop Juan Antonio de Lardizábal y Elorza. It was published by Calvo along with that of José Guevara, S.J., her nephew.

87 Diego Calleja, S.J., *Vida de Sor Juana* (Mexico: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1936), 52.

88 Fr. Juan Crisóstomo López de Aguado, *Hojas del árbol de la vida* (Mexico: Viuda de Joseph Hogal, 1743), 48.

89 Fr. Ignacio Saldaña, *La penitente paloma o gemebunda maya. Sermón fúnebre en las exequias de . . . la venerable madre Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Encarnación* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca, 1758), n.p. The quote comes from the approval of the sermon by Fr. Miguel de Alcaraz. Fr. Sebastián de Santander, comparing the nuns to doves, noted how they adopt the shape of the cross as they fly. Praising a deceased nun, he compared her to a crucified dove. See Sebastián de Santander, *Sermón fúnebre que en las honras de la venerable Madre Jacinta Maria Anna de S. Antonio, religiosa de el monasterio de Santa Catarina de Sena de esta ciudad de Oaxaca* (Oaxaca: Doña Francisca Flores, 1720), 13v–14.

90 AGN, Mexico, Historia, Vol. 77, exp. 2, *Cristus confixus*, 1805.

91 Alonso Velasco, *Exaltación de la divina misericordia en la milagrosa renovación de la soberana imagen de Cristo Señor N. crucificado que se encuentra en el convento de San Joseph de Carmelitas Descalzas de esta ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico: María Benavides, Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1699). There was a second edition, published by Herederos de Miguel Rivera in 1724.

92 Oscar Mazín Gómez, *El Cabildo Catedral de Valladolid de Michoacán* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1996), 309–11.

93 Fr. Pedro de Borges, *Sermón*, 3.

94 Fray Agustín de la Madre de Dios, O.C.D., *Tesoro escondido*, 199, 306. On the worship of the Sacred Heart by other female visionaries, see Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. Margaret Winkworth. Introduced by Sister Maximilian Marnau (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 34–36.

95 Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 299–302.

96 On Bishop Santa Cruz, see José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 317, 335, 349–53, 370; AGI, Mexico, Leg. 829 (1696–1724); Aureliano Tapia Méndez, *Carta de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz a su confesor. Autodefensa espiritual* (Monterrey, Mexico: Producciones Al Voleo, el Troquel, 1993), 229; Miruna Achim, “Mysteries of the Heart: The Gift of Bishop Fernández de Santa Cruz to the Nuns of Santa Mónica,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 14.1 (June 2005): 83–102.

97 Joseph F. Chorpeneing, “Heart Imagery in Santa Teresa.” *Studies in Honor of Elias Rivers, Scripta Humanistica* 50 (1989): 49–58. Alice B. Kehoe, “The Sacred Heart. A Case for Stimulus Diffusion,” *American Ethnologist* 6.4 (November 1979), 763–71.

98 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 455, 471. The emblem of the heart in flames as a symbol of Christ’s heart and his love is commonplace in colonial paintings and engravings.

99 BN Mexico, Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, *Cartas espirituales*, Ms. fols. 59, 95, 169, 225–26, 238, 331.

100 Sor María de Santa Clara, *Subida al Monte de Mirra sendero a el corazón de Jesús. Exercicios devotos . . .* (Mexico: Viuda de Francisco Rivera, 1747).

101 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 458; Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 125–51.

102 Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin. Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 43–75.

103 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas*, 1023. For a history of the dogma of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All*

Her Sex. The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 236–54.

- 104** For Puebla, see Rosalva Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Angeles del siglo XVIII* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2000), 274–77.
- 105** Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a National Symbol, 1531–1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995); D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Traditions Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 106** Alicia Bazarte Martínez and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, comps., *El convento de San Jerónimo en Puebla de los Angeles. Crónica y testimonios* (Puebla: Lit0-grafia Magno Graf, S.A. de C.V., 2000), 84–133.
- 107** Fr. Pedro Antonio de Aguirre, *Inmortal aplauso del triunfo original de la Inmaculada Concepción de Nuestra Señora la Sacratísima Virgen María, declamado . . . en el observantísimo convento de San Felipe de Jesús . . . de Mexico* (1696) (Mexico: Juan Joseph Guillena, 1697).
- 108** Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas*, 181–86, 189–93, 211–16, 224–29, 231–35, 292–95, 299–306, 324–28, 337–43. On Sor Juana, see Georgina Sabat de Rivers, *En busca de sor Juana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1998); Margo Glantz, *Sor Juana: La comparación y la hipérbole* (Mexico: Conaculta, 2000); George H. Tavard, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and The Theology of Beauty. The First Mexican Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University, 1991); Sara Poot Herrera, *Y diversa de mí misma entre vuestras plumas ando. Homenaje internacional a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1993); Sara Poot Herrera, ed., *Sor Juana y su mundo. Una mirada actual* (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 1995); Carmen Beatriz López-Portillo, coord., *Sor Juana y su mundo: Una mirada actual. Memorias del Congreso Internacional* (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana/UNESCO/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998).
- 109** *Novena en culto de la presentación de la Reyna de los Angeles, Maria Santísima a el Templo de Jerusalén. Por una religiosa de velo y choro del convento de Señora Santa Inés de Monte Policiano de la ciudad de la Puebla de los Angeles* (Puebla: Viuda de Miguel de Ortega, 1746).
- 110** Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*, no pagination.
- 111** *Modo de pedir las licencias de cada mes, a Nuestra Señora la Virgen María*; Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 81–102. The cult of the Assumption dates back to at least 600 A.D. and assumes the elevation of her incorrupt body. See Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 201–13.
- 112** All quotes are from *Modo de pedir las licencias*, no pagination. Sor María de San José, an Augustinian from Puebla, published a devotional book on the stations of the cross as Mary had “taught” her in a vision in 1693. It resembles other devotional meditations on the Passion of Christ. See Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, eds. and trans., *A Wild Country Out in the Garden. The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 234–46.
- 113** Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen. A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1998); Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., *Women in Medieval History and Historiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).
- 114** Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa. Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 96, and by the same author, “Navigating the Waves (of Devotion): Toward a Gendered Analysis of Early Modern Catholicism.” In *Crossing Boundaries. Attending to Early Modern Women*, ed. Jane Donawerth and Adele Seef (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 200), 161–72; Geraldine McKendrik and Angus MacKay, “Visionaries and Affective Spirituality During the First Half of the Sixteenth Century.” In *Cultural Encounters. The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Cruz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 93–104.
- 115** Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, 96, and by the same author, “Navigating the Waves (of Devotion), 161–72; Isabelle Poutrin, *Le voile et la plume. Autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans l’Espagne moderne* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1995), passim; Jesús Gómez López and Inocente García de Andrés, *Sor Juana de la Cruz: Mística e iluminista Toledana* (Toledo: Diputación Provincial, 1982); María Pilar Manero Sorolla, “Visionarias reales en la España áurea.” In *Images de la femme en Espagne aux XVIè et XVIIè siècles*, coord. Agustín Redondo (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1994), 305–18.
- 116** As an example of the strictures under which lay visionaries lived, see Cecilia Ferrazzi, *Autobiography of an Aspiring Saint*, transcribed, translated, and edited by Anne Jacobson Schutte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 117** Cited in Caro Baroja, *Las formas complejas*, 36. On treatises on prophecies, see 37–38. For lay visionaries, see Antonio Rubial, “Josefa de San Luis Beltrán, la cordera de Dios: Escritura, oralidad y gestualidad en una visionaria del siglo XVII novohispano (1654).” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 161–204; Ellen Gunnarsdottir, “Una visionaria barroca de la provincia Mexicana: Francisca de los Angeles (1644–1744).” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 205–62; Ellen Gunnarsdottir, *Mexican Karismata. The Baroque Vocation of Francisca de los Angeles, 1674–1744* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Nora Jaffary, *False Mystics and Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).
- 118** Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, 6; Kathryn Joy McKnight, *The Mystic of Tunja. The Writings of Madre Castillo 1671–1742* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Fernando Iturburu, *(Auto)biografía y misticismos femeninos en la colonia* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2000); Manuel Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas Fundaciones femeninas Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997); Elia J. Armacanqui-Tipacti, *Sor María Manuela de Santa Ana: Una teresiana Peruana* (Cusco: Centro de Estudios Regionales Andinos Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1999); Poutrin, *Le voile et la plume*, 89–100. In New Spain, Miguel Godínez (Michael Wadding), S.J., teacher of theology at the Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo in Mexico, wrote a classic treatise on mystical theology in which he defined mystical behavior, its failures, and rewards. See Miguel Godínez, *Práctica de la Teología Mística* (Quito: Imprenta de V. Valencia, 1856).

- 119 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Melquiades Andrés Martín, *Los recogidos. Nueva visión de la mística española (1500–1700)* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1975); San Juan de la Cruz, *Subida del Monte Carmelo. Noche Oscura. Cántico Espiritual. Llama de Amor Viva*, passim.
- 120 Underhill, *Mysticism*, 176–97.
- 121 Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena. UT, NLBC, Ms., fol. 12. The anguish this nun felt, owing to her lack of understanding of her own visions, was solved by her confessors, but when they failed to help her, this doubled her anxiety. The fear that visions could be the work of the Devil was very real for her as well as for her confessors.
- 122 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, Libro Cuarto, 307.
- 123 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, Libro Cuarto, 317. See also 318, 320, and 329. Fr. Agustín incorporated the writings of her confessor, the well-known Miguel Godínez, as well as those of Sor Francisca de la Natividad. For the latter, see Rosalva Loreto López, “Escrito por ella misma. Vida de la Madre Francisca de la Natividad (1630),” in Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 24–66. For the belief in diabolic apparitions, see Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
- 124 Compare with German Observant nuns in the fifteenth century. See Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles. Women Writing about Women and Reform in The Late Middle Ages* (Univeristy Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 178.
- 125 Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*. He argues for the study of gendered images in the written and artistic devotional corpus dedicated to women. His approach is just as useful for the analysis of the images in visionary experiences.
- 126 Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio, Libro, fol. 46.
- 127 Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio, Libro, fols. 31v, 47. See also Asunción Lavrin, “La Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio y su mundo visionario,” *Signos Históricos*, No. 13 (enero–junio 2005): 22–41.
- 128 Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio, Libro, fol. 21.
- 129 See Caroline Walker Bynum’s explanation of the meaning of Christ’s blood in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 176–78; “The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages,” *Church History* 71.4 (December 2002): 685–714; John C. Hirsh, *The Boundaries of Faith. The Development and Transmission of Medieval Spirituality* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 91–110.
- 130 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 16–19.
- 131 Kathleen Myers, *Word from New Spain. The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656–1719)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 87–101, 189–91.
- 132 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 134–35.
- 133 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 151.
- 134 Myers and Powell trace her literary sources, for she was well read, to women such as Teresa de Avila, María de Agreda, Mariana de San José, and Santa Catalina de Siena, not to mention Bernard de Clairvaux’s affective piety. The language of love between bride and holy groom also has traceable roots in Christian women writers such as Gertrude of Helfta. See her *The Herald of Divine Love*. Gertrude engages in constant dialogue with Christ in several parts of her work, much like this text and those of other Mexican nuns. While we do not know if any Mexican nun read Gertrude, she was known in Phillip II’s court and her works were popular among the discaled Carmelites. For the worship of Saint Gertrude in Mexico, see Antonio Rubial and Doris Bieňko de Peralta, “Las más amada de Cristo. Iconografía y culto de Santa Gertrudis la Magna en Nueva España,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 83 (2003): 1–53. For the language of love, see also Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 383–426.
- 135 Brian Larkin, “The Splendor of Worship: Baroque Catholicism, Religious Reform, and Last Wills and Testaments in Eighteenth Century Mexico City,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 8.4 (Fall 1999): 405–42.
- 136 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fols. 125v–126. See also Asunción Lavrin, “La escritura desde un mundo oculto: Espiritualidad y anonimidad en el convento de San Juan de la Penitencia,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 22 (2000): 49–75, and “Sor María de Jesús Felipa: un diario espiritual de mediados del siglo XVIII (1758).” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 111–60. I have very recently identified six more volumes of her writings at the Archivo Histórico de la Provincia Franciscana de Michoacán in Celaya, Mexico. It seems that she began writing in 1739. The last volume in the archive is dated 1760, as *Tomo Vigésimo Primero* (Twenty-first volume).
- 137 María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 120v.
- 138 María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 107.
- 139 María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fols. 125–26.
- 140 María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 90.

- [141](#) María de Jesús Felipa, *Diary*, fols. 111v–112. Paper was scarce and costly in Mexico and her remark points to her awareness that using it for her writing could be construed as wasteful.
- [142](#) Theologians were very often highly suspicious of women's visions, having been trained to see women as inferior vessels. See Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 50, 97, and 104.
- [143](#) Hildegard of Bingen is an example of a medieval nun who undertook an active reinterpreted and didactic role in her writing. See Matthew Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Words, with Letters and Songs* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear Ad Company, 1987).

CHAPTER FOUR

EPIGRAPH: AGN, BN, Leg 85, exp. 38.

1 Joseph Ximenez Samaniego, *Relación de la vida de la venerable madre Sor María de Jesús*. (Madrid: Imprenta de la Causa de la Venerable Madre, 1755), 190–93.

2 Sor María Dolores Rivera y San Román, *Noticias históricas de la fundación del convento de religiosas Dominicas de Santa María la Gracia de Guadalajara* (Guadalajara: Lit. Tip. Ancira, 1924), 17–30, passim, for information on daily life and governance.

3 BN Madrid, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Regla y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de Nuestra Señora de la Concepción*. Ms. 3877.

4 Ibid., fol. 217.

5 Francisco de la Maza, *Arquitectura de los coros de conventos de monjas en Mexico*, 3rd ed. (Mexico: UNAM, 1983); José Rogelio Álvarez, “Un siglo arquitectónico.” In *Sor Juana y su mundo. Una mirada actual*, ed. Sara Poot Herrera (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 1995), 197–248; Rosalva Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Angeles del siglo XVIII* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2000), 104–14.

6 Universidad Iberoamericana, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Acervo Histórico. Obras espirituales y rescates del Dulcísimo Esposo Jesús que han hecho las religiosas de la congregación erigida en el monasterio de San Bernardo, 1770–1808, Ms. 30. The highest number was 590,837 “deeds” achieved in 1780–81.

7 UT, NLBC, Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena, monja profesa del convento de Sr. S. Geronimo de la ciudad de Mexico, hija de Domingo de Lorravaquio, y de Isabel Muñoz, su legítima muger. Ms. Hereafter cited as Vida.

8 Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women. Periculoso and Its Commentators, 1298–1545* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1997).

9 Antonio Núñez, S.J., *Cartilla de la doctrina religiosa para las niñas que desean ser monjas* (Mexico: Viuda de Ribera, 1708), 335–36. There was another edition in Puebla in 1750 dedicated to the teachers of novices. This tract never lost its popularity or relevance among women religious.

10 BN Madrid, Juan de Palafox, *Pastorales, exhortaciones, etc.*, del Obispo de Puebla a las corporaciones religiosas, Ms. 3877, fols. 14, 15.

11 Núñez, *Cartilla*, 36v–37.

12 Juan de Ortega Montañés, *Reglas y Constituciones de las religiosas por autoridad apostólica deben observar las religiosas Gerónimas del convento de San Lorenzo de la ciudad de Mexico*. (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1707), 84.

13 Antonio Núñez de Haro y Peralta, *Sermones escogidos, pláticas espirituales privadas y dos pastorales*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Imprenta de la hija de Ibarra, 1806–8), 2:276.

14 José María Marroquí, *La ciudad de Mexico*, 3 vols. (Mexico: Tip. Y Lit. “La Europea,” 1900–1903), 2:79.

15 *Copia de la carta que la M.R.M. Joaquina María de Zavaleta, abadesa del monasterio de San Felipe de Jesús y pobres Capuchinas de esta imperial ciudad de Mexico, escribe a las M.R.R.M.M. Preladas de los demas monasterios, dandoles noticia de las heroicas virtudes, y dichosa muerte de la M.R.M. Augustina Nico-lasas María de los Dolores Muñoz y Sandoval, abadesa que fue tercera vez del referido monasterio*. (Mexico: Imprenta Nueva de la Biblioteca Mexicana, 1755).

16 Universidad Iberoamericana, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Acervos Históricos. Libro de Elecciones del Convento del San Bernardo, Ms. passim.

17 AINAH, FF, Vol. 107, fol. 77; Vol. 108, fol. 6 (Santa Clara, 1776). Also, see Vol. 108, fol. 179–81. Election of Abbess in San Juan de la Penitencia, 1779, 1780. The abbess elected in 1779 died within a year and a new election was conducted.

18 AGN, BN, Leg. 100, exp. 15. Visita y elección de Priora en . . . el convento de San Lorenzo, 2 July 1729.

19 Núñez, *Cartilla*, 22–27. Nuns should study the qualities of those who would be eligible and pray for God’s help in achieving them.

20 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, *Diary*.

21 *Reglas y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de los conventos de Santa Catarina de Sena y Santa Inés de Monte Policiano de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Puebla: Seminario Palafoxiano, 1773), 132.

22 Miguel de Torres, *Dechado de príncipes eclesiásticos, que dibujó con su ejemplar, virtuosa y ajustada vida . . . D. Manuel Fernández de S. Cruz y Sahagún* [1716]) (Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliófilos, 1999), 110–11.

23 BN, FF, exp. 1262, fol. 9–10. Carta de la abadesa del convento de Santa Isabel, Gertrudis de San Pedro al Comisario General, Octubre 12, 1716. In 1712, Sor Isabel Gertrudis had lost the election to Francisca Rosa de Jesús María by four votes. See AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 31.

24 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 54.

25 BN, FF, exp. 1262, fols. 20–29.

26 The animosity between the regular Orders and the archbishops of Mexico was not new. Before he assumed his episcopal seat Fr. Payo Enríquez de Rivera (1668–80) was involved in a suit against Augustinians and Franciscans, who sought to free themselves from episcopal authority for printing books, and requested jurisdictional privileges to some of their members. See Francisco Sosa, *El episcopado Mexicano* (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1962), 21.

27 BN, FF, exp. 1262, fols. 20–29.

28 AGN, Clero Regular y Secular, Vol. 160, exp. 2 (1717). In a legal suit addressed to the Audiencia, Cillero claimed that Fr. Manuel de Argüello, ex-Provincial General, was carrying out a conspiracy against him in connivance with Fr. Joseph Peraza, Vice-Commissary General, and Alonso de León, Provincial Vicar. Having been deposed by his superiors, Cillero took refuge in the Jesuit College of San Andrés, from where he initiated a defensive campaign alleging that his enemies had used the election of Santa Isabel as the venue to depose him after having first tried to do so in other Franciscan convents without success.

29 Fr. José Cillero was also accused of meddling in yet another election. Sor Ursula Rosa de San Francisco, of San Juan de la Penitencia, also claimed that Cillero wished to invalidate her election by alleging that she was “illegitimate.” The irate nun demanded that the books of profession be consulted, and proposed to offer more information to prove that she had been born in blessed wedlock. She felt deeply hurt by the demerit to her “honor” and wished Cillero to restore it before the entire community. See AINAH, FF, Vol. 102, fol. 24.

30 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fols. 24, 25, 26, 28, 38, 54, 79.

31 Joseph Lanciego y Egulaz, *Carta Pastoral . . . que escribe a sus amadas hijas las religiosas de toda su filiación* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Miguel Ribera, 1716).

32 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 38, N71 and N59; Manuel Ramos Medina, *Imagen de santidad en un mundo profano* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1990), 92–105.

33 Manuel Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas. Fundaciones Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997), 170–80.

34 *Alegación Jurídica y Manifestación de los derechos, que para el uso de sus defensas y hacer constar su Inocencia ha practicado la M.R.M. Juana María de San Esteban* (Mexico, 1728).

35 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp. 38 (1749).

36 BN, FF, Box 76, exp. 1285, fols. 8–9.

37 BN, FF, Box 75, exp. 126. This opinion was given after a consultation on the character and replacement of the abbess of the convent of Santa Clara in Mexico City.

38 BN, FF, Box 76, exp. 1285, fols. 8–9. “Do not pay attention to the charming voices of flesh and blood. They take you to damnation. As wives of the Immaculate Lamb, shed all inclinations, friendships, and worldly concerns, and sacrifice yourselves to the greater glory of God and the salvation of your souls.”

39 Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns. The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101–47.

40 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 4, exp. 1.

41 AGN, Vol. 140, exp. 6. In writing to the archbishop she was requesting the intervention of the Vicar of Nuns, and going over the authorities in her own Franciscan Order, who were presumably in charge of such needs. In fact, Franciscans were notoriously poor managers and this abbess felt more confident writing to the archbishop directly.

42 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 85.

43 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 117. See also AGN, BN, Leg. 100, exp. 15 for San Lorenzo. San Lorenzo had four counselors, four *porteras*, four sacristans, five listeners (*escuchas*), and two nurses. Given the large number of existing records, it would be difficult to record the various titles of internal officials.

44 AINAH, FF, Vol. 93, fols. 1–44.

45 Ortega Montañés, *Regla y Constituciones*, 94. For a modern abbreviated version of the allocation of offices within the convent of San Jerónimo, Puebla, see Alicia Bazarte and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, comps. *El convento de San Jerónimo en Puebla de los Angeles. Crónicas y testimonios* (Puebla: Talleres de Litografía Magno Graf, S.A. de C.V., 2000), 67–73.

46 AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 792.

47 For more detail on the teacher of novices, see Chapter 2.

48 Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos*, 126–28, 132. She describes other auxiliary offices in the convents of Puebla.

49 Ibid., 125

50 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 204–5. Discalced Carmelite Sor Luisa de San Nicolás is said to have been adorned “with the gifts of prudence, capacity and talent in regard to the administration of the income.” She was accountant for many years.

51 AGN, BN, Leg. 146, No. 57.

52 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos y poderosos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnífico real convento de Jesús María de Mexico* (Mexico: UNAM/Condumex, 1995), 129v. Sigüenza y Góngora simply copied, with some small alterations, the autobiography of the nun. The experiences here recalled were told in her own words.

53 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 135–35v.

54 Ibid., 135v.

55 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 135–36.

56 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 136. Sor Francisca Evangelista “did not want a single *real* to pass through her hands to avoid any suspicion on how she spent the money. They ordered me to keep all the money available in the convent, and all the *oficialas* came to me, and I was pleased to provide them whatever they needed.... I told them to spend without being miserly . . . and since I had permission, I gave to those who were in need and the sick, asking to keep the secret.”

57 Fr. Miguel de Torres, *Dechado de príncipes eclesiásticos*, 323–27.

58 For examples, see the holdings of the historical archive of the Secretariat of Health and Welfare in Mexico City, which holds the most complete collection of the financial records of the convent of Jesús María. See also AINAH, FF, Vol. 105 for a Franciscan example.

59 AGN, BN, Leg. 667.

60 AGN, BN, Leg. 667. All information on La Encarnación’s ordering the internal administration of the convent is in this source. See *Cuadernos de Apuntes de la Contaduría*.

61 From the end of the seventeenth century, records show that losses on houses and land were significant and that nothing much was gained by suits in the courts. See, for example, BN Mexico, Leg. 667, exp. 10 (1693).

62 Linda A. Curcio, *The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico. Performing Power and Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Frances Lourdes Ramos, “The Politics of Ritual in Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, 1695–1770.” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 2005.

63 Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos*, 120–21.

64 Ibid., 120.

65 AGN, BN, Leg. 1025, exp. 10; Leg. 100, exp. 15. The latter contains the visit of the vicar and the election of an abbess in San Lorenzo in 1729. It corroborates all the key details of the ceremonial guidelines of the previous source.

66 AGN, BN, Leg. 100, exp. 15.

67 Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns*, 156–58, describes in full detail the ceremonial of a diocesan visit and election to La Purísima Concepción.

68 José L. Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1988).

69 Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico, Sala Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Acervos Históricos, Ms. 95 to 95/50. Plática en el convento de Santa Inés de Mexico en la Cuaresma del año 1769; Pláticas de Adviento en el convento de Santa Inés, Mexico, 1778 (two different mss.); Segunda Plática de Adviento en el convento de Santa Inés, 1778. These are unsigned, unnumbered drafts for the preacher’s use.

70 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 139–140v.

71 AINAH, FF, Vol. 92, fol. 38. One designed for the Convent of Santa Clara of Querétaro by a master architect cost 1,700 pesos. The result “pleased and satisfied” the nuns.

72 AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 158, exp. 95.

73 On confraternities, see Asunción Lavrin, “Diversity and Disparity: Rural and Urban Confraternities in Eighteenth Century Mexico.” In *Manipulating the Saints: Religious Brotherhoods and Social Integration in Post Conquest Latin America*, ed. Alfred Meyers and Dianne E. Hopkins (Hamburg: Wayasbah, 1988), 67–100; Asunción Lavrin, “Rural Confraternities in the Local Economies of New Spain: The Bishopric of Oaxaca in the Context of Colonial Mexico.” In *Studying the Indian Community in New Spain*, ed. Arij Ouweneel (Amsterdam: Centrum Voor Studie Documentatie van Latijns Amerika, 1990), 224–49; Asunción Lavrin, “La Congregación de San Pedro. Una cofradía urbana de Mexico colonial, 1640–1730,” *Historia Mexicana* 29.4 (Abril-Junio 1980): 562–601.

74 AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 158, exp. 95. A note at the bottom of this receipt states, “this was reduced to 128 pesos.” This may mean that

somehow the nuns were obliged to cut the expenses back, although this is not certain.

⁷⁵ AGN, BN, Leg. 649, exp. 6.

⁷⁶ AGN, BN, Leg. 1151, *passim*.

⁷⁷ See Chapter 9 on the reforms attempted in the 1770s.

CHAPTER FIVE

EPIGRAPH: Fr. Alonso Gil, *Directorio para religiosas que dedica al M.R.P.M. Fr. Thomas de Morales* (Puebla: Viuda de Miguel Ortega, 1722).

1 BN, FF, Box 75, Leg. 1259, fols. 17–18, exp. 1263 (1726–29), 1264 (1732); 1267 (1750–57); Box 76, 1267, Patente de Joseph Ximeno, 1750; AINAH, FF, Vol. 105, fol. 224. These sources supply information on all the orders issued by Franciscan prelates in the second half of the seventeenth century.

2 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

3 BN, FF, Box 75, No. 1253 (1586); José Manuel de Castro Santa Anna, *Diario de Sucesos Notables*. In *Documentos para la Historia de Mexico*, 4 vols. (Mexico, 1853–57), 4:18, 20, 21, 22–25, 26–29, 34, 38, 42, 43. Castro Santa Anna pointed out that in Jesús María, the royal retinue stayed amused and happy until ten o’clock, and San Lorenzo offered a “*sarao*” that kept them until the same hour. Sarao implies a performing activity. They stayed until 11:00 p.m. in Santa Clara, San Jerónimo, and La Encarnación. A smaller number of courtiers visited the discalced Franciscan Capuchins in the morning.

4 Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana or The Traps of Faith* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1988), 117–38, 190–95.

5 AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, Leg. 306.

6 Rosalva Loreto López, “Prácticas alimenticias en los conventos de mujeres en la Puebla del siglo XVIII.” In *Conquista y comida. Consecuencias del encuentro de dos mundos*, coord. Janet Long (Mexico: UNAM, 1996), 481–82. A beaterio was an institution sheltering women who lived a pious life, similar to that of nuns, but without making a vow of enclosure. Some beaterios evolved into nunneries, as did Santa Rosa de Santa María.

7 AINAH, FF, Vol. 106, fol. 40 ff. San Juan de la Penitencia complained about the lack of funds and begged for help from the Crown and the archbishop on several occasions in the seventeenth century. La Concepción of Mexico City, the first convent of the Vice-Kingdom, suffered financial penuries throughout the late 1600s. See “Catálogo de pobladores de Indias,” *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* 14.2 (1943): 333; AGN, BN, Leg. 140, exp. 29 (1634), for San Juan de la Penitencia; Alberto María Carreño, *Cedulario de los siglos XVI y XVII. El Obispo Don Juan de Palafox y Mendoza y el conflicto con la Compañía de Jesús* (Mexico: Ediciones Victoria, 1947), 258. The king asked Viceroy Marquis of Gelves to find out about the financial state of La Concepción and, if necessary, assign the convent the proceeds of an encomienda for six years to help the nuns out.

8 *El convento de religiosas de Santa Clara de Mexico [sobre bienes y derechos de] su M.R.M. abadesa actual Mariana de San Francisco* (Mexico: Felipe Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1782).

9 For the administration of conventual income see Asunción Lavrin, “El convento de Santa Clara de Querétaro: La administración de sus propiedades en el siglo XVII,” *Historia Mexicana* No. 97 (July-September 1975): 76–117; “Los conventos de monjas en la Nueva España.” In *La Iglesia en la economía de América Latina: Siglos XVI al XIX*, comp. A. J. Bauer (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1986). See also “El capital eclesiástico y las élites sociales en Nueva España a fines del Siglo XVIII,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 1.1 (Winter 1985): 1–27; “Problems and Policies in the Administration of Nunneries in Mexico, 1800–1835,” *The Americas* 28.1 (July 1971): 57–77; “Mexican Nunneries from 1835 to 1860: Their Administrative Policies and Relations with the State,” *The Americas* 28.3 (January 1972): 288–310; “La riqueza de los conventos de monjas en Nueva España: Estructura y evolución en el siglo XVIII,” *Cahiers des Amériques Latines* 53 (February 1973): 27–49. This essay has also appeared as “Los conventos de monjas en la Nueva España.” In A. J. Bauer, comp., *La Iglesia en la economía de América Latina: Siglos XVI al XIX*, 193–222.

10 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy Católicos y poderosos reyes de España Nuestros Señores en su magnífico real convento de Jesús Maria de Mexico [1684]* (Mexico: UNAM/Conduxem, 1995), 24–25.

11 AGN, BN, Leg. 140, exp. 72, 77; Leg. 667, exp. 10. The nuns requested permission to beg for alms for the construction of an altar. This activity was carried out by seculars outside the convent. Large sums of money were used in the construction of the church of all convents, regardless of the problems of internal administration. As an example see AGN, BN, Leg. 99, exp. 4. Accounts of the new church of the convent of Regina Coeli, 1721. AGN, *Templos y Conventos*, Vol. 43 contains accounts of the construction and repairs of houses in several convents.

12 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 3, exp. 22; Leg. 4, exp. 1, exp. 17.

13 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 4, exp. 17.

14 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 5, exp. 18. Cargo que recibe Ntra. M. Abadesa por mano de Lorenzo de Burgos. Accounts are irregular.

15 In this decade the elite Jesús María was in economic straits. AGN, BN, Leg. 140, exp. 77 (1635). In the 1670s, La Concepción was spending more on its upkeep than its income. See Leg. 377, and 1255, exp. 14.

16 AGN, BN, Leg. 1221, exp. 3. Accounts are incomplete and do not permit a more complete analysis of the purchase of staples and their price.

17 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18. Only 10 pesos out of 40, the total worth of her possessions, were distributed among thirty-two nuns of the convent. Thus, they received barely more than 2 reales each. This was hardly more than a charitable memento from the deceased.

18 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 5, exp. 21, 29. Information on a monthly basis is irregular. As an example, two months in 1632 can be quoted. In June 1632, the convent bought four sheep for the infirmary and five in April 1633.

19 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 76.

20 *Ibid.*, 102v.

- 21 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 5, exp. 18.
- 22 Alicia Bazarte Martínez, Enrique Tovar Esquivel, and Martha A. Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo (1598–1867)* (Mexico: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, 2001), 366–70.
- 23 Juan de Robles, *Oración fúnebre, elogio sepulcral en el aniversario de la muy ilustre señora y venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto, religiosa profesa de velo negro en el observantísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús en la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Viuda de Juan Ribera, 1685); Ignacio Saldaña, *La penitente paloma o gemebunda Maya. Sermón fúnebre en las exequias de Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima. Trinidad del convento de San Juan de la Penitencia* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca, 1758). Sor Sebastiana put bitter substances into her food, or let it rot before eating it.
- 24 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 192. For the meaning of food in religious life, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
- 25 Fr. Ignacio de la Peña, *Trono Mexicano en el convento de religiosas pobres Capuchinas . . . en la insigne ciudad de Mexico* (Madrid: F. de Hierro, 1902), 65.
- 26 Manuel Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas. Fundaciones Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997), 213–15.
- 27 AINAH, FF, Vol. 102, fol. 50.
- 28 AGN, BN, Leg. 1151.
- 29 AGN, BN, Leg. 1221, exp. 3. There were fifty nuns in the convent.
- 30 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.
- 31 AGN, BN, Leg. 1151. See also AINAH, FF, Vol. 105, fols. 52–53, 56–57 for Santa Clara Atrisco, a convent of limited means, where in 1762–63, its forty-two nuns received 72 pesos monthly for their personal chocolate, in addition to their monthly allowance.
- 32 For the process of exchange of food and culinary traditions, see Janet Long, coord., *Conquista y comida*, passim. See also Sophie D. Coe, *America's First Cuisines* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
- 33 In the eighteenth century some Franciscan prelates approved the system whereby nuns were given a daily sum to cover their expenses. See AINAH, FF, Vol. 105, fol. 165, “Regulación de los gastos del convento de Santa Clara de Atlixco por orden del Comisario General, 1743.”
- 34 Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Santiago de Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España* [1646] (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900), 360.
- 35 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.
- 36 Josefina Muriel, “Los hallazgos gastronómicos: Bibliografía de cocina en la Nueva España y el Mexico del siglo XIX.” In Long, *Conquista y comida*, 469–79.
- 37 Mónica Lavín and Ana Benítez Muro, *Dulces hábitos. Golosinas del convento* (Mexico: Editorial Clío, 2000), 23–24. See also Rosalva Loreto López and Ana Benítez Muro, *Un bocado para los Angeles. La cocina en los conventos* (Mexico: Clío, 2000); Yuri de Gortari Krauss and Edmundo Escamilla Solís, *Guisos y golosos del barroco* (Mexico: Clío, 2000).
- 38 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1969), 109, 986.
- 39 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas*, 986.
- 40 Loreto López, “Prácticas alimenticias,” 486–89.
- 41 For a mole recipe, see Loreto López and Benítez, *Un bocado*, 56.
- 42 Antonio Núñez, S.J., *Distribución de las obras ordinarias y extraordinarias del día, para hacerlas perfectamente, conforme al estado de las señoras religiosas. Instruidas con doce máximas substanciales para la vida regular y espiritual que deben seguir. Publicadas por el convento de la Encarnación* (Mexico: Viuda de Miguel Ribera Calderón, 1712), 140; see also 124–36.
- 43 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo del muy religioso convento de San José, de religiosas Carmelitas descalzas de la ciudad de Puebla de los Angeles* [1732] (Puebla: Universidad Iberoamericana y Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 1992), 118, 176, 181, 185.
- 44 BN, FF, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, Ms. 1844, fol. 93.
- 45 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 360, 416.
- 46 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 218, 220, 336.
- 47 AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 212, Opúsculos Históricos. Notas sobre el convento de Santa Clara de la villa de Carrión, valle de Atrisco, 1621–1678. Franco, *Segunda parte*, 452; AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

48 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 471.

49 AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 212. Opúsculos históricos sobre el convento de Santa Clara de la Villa de Carrión, valle de Atrisco, 1621–1678; Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*. In *Teatro Mexicano* (Mexico: Doña Maria de Benavides, Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1698 [1697], 110.

50 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 116 v.

51 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 73.

52 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 327–28.

53 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 471.

54 AGN, BN, Leg. 140, fol. 106.

55 AGN, BN, Leg. 85, exp. 5

56 AINAH, FF, Vol. 106, fol. 44 ff.

57 BN, FF, Box 75, No. 1255. La Reina Gobernadora al Presidente y Oidores de la Audiencia [1678].

58 Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Obras del Ilustrísimo, Excelentísimo [sic], y Venerable Siervo de Dios*. Tomo III, Part 1, *Direcciones para los señores obispos* (Madrid: Imprenta de Gabriel Ramírez, 1752), 46. “It is difficult to remedy this abuse without great scandal. Thus, it will be better to deal with it wisely, and although it cannot be eliminated, it is, at least, noticed.”

59 BN, FF, Box 75, No. 1255. Patente del Provincial [1659].

60 BN, FF, Box 75, No. 1255. Real provisión de 27 de Junio de 1667; Real despacho de 13 de febrero de 1668.

61 Ibid.

62 AGI, Escribanía de Cámara, Leg. 175A, 1668. According to the report of the convent of Santa Isabel, Fr. Hernando had also forbidden them to use linen and chocolate, or accept girls for their education. All servants were to be dismissed.

63 Ibid.

64 BN, FF, Box 75, No. 1255.

65 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fols. 22–23.

66 See Chapter 9.

67 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 459.

68 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 4, exp. 1.

69 AGN, BN, Leg. 462.

70 Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto . . . hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico, Imprenta de Antuerpia de los Herederos de la Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1689), 11–13.

71 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 168v.

72 Francisco Pardo, biographer of Sor María de Jesús, Tomelín, tells how the nun had endured for over twenty years, the services of a Chinese slave (Filipina?), “haughty and badly adjusted,” who served her in a “rude and rustic” manner and “talked to her without respect “(*en forma desmedida*). She bore the “bitterness” of that relationship as part of the suffering the Lord gave her. See Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroicas [sic] de la Madre María de Jesús, religiosa en el convento de la Limpia Concepción de la Virgen Maria. N. Señora de la ciudad de Puebla*. (Mexico: Viuda de Bernardo Calderón, 1676), 93.

73 AGN, BN, Leg. 697. Cotejo del testamento de Clara Mejía de Vera, 1696.

74 AGN, BN, Leg. 213, Bundle 1.

75 Bazarte Martínez, Tovar, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo*, 121.

76 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

77 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18; María del Carmen Reyna, *El convento de San Jerónimo. Vida conventual y finanzas* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1990), 45–49; AGN, BN, Leg. 101, exp. 2, 1672. A San Luis Potosí clergyman donated two mulatto children, ages five and nine, to serve the convent. See also Leg. 195, exp. 5 (1634) for slaves in Santa Inés, and Leg. 113, exp. 15 in San Juan de la Penitencia (1672).

78 Reyna, *El convento de San Jerónimo*, 48.

79 AGN, BN, Leg. 697 (1704).

80 GSU-AHAOM, Section 5, Leg. 253, Reel 753973 (1755).

81 See Chapter 8 on Indian nuns for the case of Salvadora de los Santos, an Otomí Indian, in Querétaro. Piety in mulatto or black girls could only earn them a place as servants in convents and schools for girls. A virtuous mulatto girl who wished to accompany several girls into one of the Puebla schools founded by Bishop Santa Cruz was destined “to serve.” In one of his letters the bishop wrote: “[She is] a little mulatto, for service. She can do it in the same school. She is a virtuous little angel who wishes to accompany the others.” See Fr. Miguel de Torres, *Dechado de príncipes eclesiásticos, que dibujó con su ejemplar, virtuosa y ajustada vida, D. Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún* [1716] (Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliófilos, 1999), 355. For Peru, see Nancy E. van Deusen, ed. and trans., *The Souls of Purgatory. The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Ursula de Jesús* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).

82 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 176. Her biography runs from p. 175v to 177, and there is also another mention on p. 121. For a mulatto donada in a Franciscan convent in Lima, see Fr. Diego de Córdova y Salinas, O.F.M., *Crónica Franciscana de las provincias del Perú* [1651] (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1957), 949–52; Asunción Lavrin, “Women and Religion in Spanish America.” In *Women and Religion in America. The Colonial and Revolutionary Period*, Vol. 2, ed. Rosemary R. Reuther and Rosemary S. Keller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 42–78.

83 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 308–21. All citations in the story are in this source.

84 BN, FF, Box 75, No. 235 (1587–88). See also Jacqueline Holler, “*Escogidas Plantas: Nuns and Beatas in Mexico City, 1531–1601* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 247–52.

85 AGN, BN, Leg. 1255, exp. 7, 9, 11, 13.

86 AGN, BN, Leg. 667.

87 AHSSA, JM, Libro 131, Litigios del convento de Jesús María, 1748–49.

88 AGN, BN, Leg. 1111, exp. 22.

89 AGN, BN, Leg. 1152, exp. 3. See also Asunción Lavrin, as cited in note 9.

90 Archivo de Notarías, Mexico, Instrumentos de D. Manuel de Puertas y Castillo, Vol. 521, fol. 118v.

91 *El convento de religiosas de Santa Clara de Mexico [sobre bienes y derechos de] su M.R.M. abadesa actual Mariana de San Francisco* (Mexico: Felipe Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1782). Two nuns of Santa Clara, in Querétaro, took their inheritance claims to the Council of the Indies. See AGN, Reales Cédulas, Vol. 106, 73 (February 22, 1775). On wills, see Chapter 2.

92 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 204. She had a dowry of 10,000 pesos, but even money could not provide a space that was unavailable.

93 Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos*, 37–81. Loreto López provides significant information on the convents as architectural urban markers.

94 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18; AINAH, FF, Vol. 104, fols. 313–17 and following. San Juan de la Penitencia argued its right to a cell that had been bought and occupied for twenty-eight years. See also AGN, BN, Leg. 146, exp. 4 (1629); Leg 213, Bundle 3. In this source, expedientes are unnumbered. These contracts belong to the convent of Regina Coeli, Mexico, for 1748. Some nuns bought cells for two lives and others bought theirs next to those of relatives or willed the use of their cells to relatives. See other examples in Bazarte Martínez, Tovar, and Tronco Rosas, *El convento Jerónimo de San Lorenzo*, 124–27.

95 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

96 Library of Congress, Richard Monday Collection, Reel 9, Vol. 11.

97 See Chapter 9 for the enforcement of the reform known as *vida común*.

98 AGN, BN, Leg. 204, exp. 14.

99 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

100 AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 84, fol. 64. The price was 1,800 pesos and the architect was Lorenzo Rodríguez, who built the *Sagrario* of the cathedral church in Mexico City.

101 AGN, BN, Leg. 697.

102 AHSSA, Leg. 2, exp. 5 (1592).

103 Nuria Salazar Simarro, “Vida conventual femenina.” In *Memoria del Coloquio Tepozotlán y la Nueva España*, coord. María del Consuelo Maquívar (Mexico: Museo del Virreinato/INAH, 1994), pp. 175–89.

[104](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 213, Bundle 1, exp. 1 (1709–12). The convent ordered the sale of all items and put the cash on loan to pharmacist Joseph de Azansa y Anaya.

[105](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18, Archivo de Notarías, Mexico, Notary Juan de Marchena, 1675–76, fol. 60v–61 records a deed of furniture for a nun’s cell.

[106](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

[107](#) Mina Ramírez Montes, “Del hábito y de los hábitos en el convento de Santa Clara de Querétaro,” In Memoria del II Congreso Internacional, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 565–71.

[108](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 18, exp. 26. A *vara* is roughly 3 feet. The cost of construction was assessed at 2 pesos per vara. Since the cells were using some walls already built, their cost was estimated at 457 and 539 pesos, respectively.

[109](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 204.

[110](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

[111](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 204.

CHAPTER SIX

EPIGRAPH: Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la historia de la provincia de Santiago de Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900), 388.

1 The virtues attributed to fasting and disregarding the needs of the body among early Christians and the practices that followed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are discussed in Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). See also the writings of Saint Catherine of Sena and Saint Catherine of Genoa, widely read and popular saints in Spain and Spanish America. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) and Catherine of Genoa, *Purgation and the Spiritual Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

2 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 296.

3 Miguel Godínez, S.J., *Práctica de la Teología Mística* (Quito: Imprenta de V. Valencia, 1856) 178. Godínez was among the most influential theologians and confessors in New Spain. On the correspondence of body and spiritual states, he had to say: “The soul . . . depends on the organ and corporeal temperaments as its instruments to produce corporal functions such as seeing, hearing, walking, speaking. Therefore the passions of the soul are symbols of the humors of the body.”

4 AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fols. 177, 179, 184. A typical salutation could read, “May the grace of the divine spirit help your Most Reverend Paternity’s heart and give your Most Reverend all that I want for Your Most Reverend Paternity, which is much health and spiritual consolation.”

5 Elías Trabulse, *La muerte de Sor Juana* (Mexico: Condumex, 1999), 19.

6 Manuel Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas. Fundaciones femeninas Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997), 221.

7 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de la muy católicos y poderosos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnífico real convento de Jesús Maña de Mexico* (Mexico: UNAM/Condumex, 1995), 101v.

8 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 218; Nuria Salazar Simarro, “Salud y enfermedad en el mundo de Sor Juana. De la Clausura.” In *Sor Juana y su mundo: Una mirada actual. Memorias del Congreso Internacional*, coord. Carmen Beatriz López-Portillo (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de sor Juana/UNESCO/ Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), 406–7.

9 Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Santiago de Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España* [1645] (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900), 462–64.

10 Elías Trabulse, in *La muerte de Sor Juana*, discusses in full all known details about her sickness and death. See 32–35.

11 Rosalva Loreto López, *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Angeles del siglo XVIII* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 2000), 55–69.

12 Loreto López, *Los conventos*, 133–35.

13 Juan Bautista Méndez, *Regla de N.G.P. San Agustín y Constituciones de las religiosas del Sagrado Orden de Predicadores* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de F. R. Lupercio, 1730), 38. This is one of the few rules that mention this aspect of communal life.

14 Loreto López, *Los conventos*, 138–39. She notices how there is total lack of information on latrines except for information culled from rules and constitutions printed outside New Spain.

15 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 221. Some Carmelite nuns never undressed completely.

16 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, *Diary*, fols. 47v–48.

17 For the need to fast and its spiritual purpose, see Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* , Book Tenth. In *The Treasury of Christian Spiritual Classics*, Introduction by Timothy P. Weber (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 145.

18 AINAH, Colección Gómez Orozco, Vol. 30, Cayetano Antonio de Torres, Directorio para las novicias de este convento de S. Felipe de Jesús y Pobres Capuchinas de Mexico, Ms.

19 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad, *Cartas espirituales*, Ms. fol. 94. She thought she was suffering from dropsy and asked her confessor to ask a physician about it, but to keep her identity undisclosed. “If your Paternity wishes to ask a physician (him not knowing the person) we will have certainty and my Paternity will see what is convenient to me.”

20 UT, NLBC, Libro en que se contiene la vida la Madre María Magdalena, monja profesa del convento de Señor San Gerónimo, Ms. fol. 8. “[The doctors] determined to slash my thighs and legs and I felt great mortification and embarrassment for being exposed to the sight of men.”

21 BN, FF, Box 76, Leg. 1277. Nómina de los varones a quienes está permi-tido entrar en la clausura del monasterio de San Juan de la Penitencia. fol. 1. They were Ignacio Lemus; Joseph García; Mariano del Villar; José Leandro, Joseph Veintemilla, surgeons (*cirujanos*); Mariano Conde and Ignacio Asís del Prado, bleeders (*barberos*); Joseph Sandoval, physician (*médico*). Also permitted were masons, garbage collectors, carpenters, blacksmiths , sacristans, “hands” to help bring heavy items into the convent, and candlemakers and grave diggers. See Memoria de los señores médicos y cirujanos que entran en este convento de Santa Clara in the same source.

22 AINAH, FF, Vol. 104, fol. 226.

23 See also Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 102–3, on the perception of sickness.

24 UT, NLBC, Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre Maria Magdalena, fol. 16.

25 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana-Comision Puebla V Centenario, 1992), 198. A nun suffering from excessive hot spells was administered a refrigerant ointment covered with lettuce leaves. She had suffered the spells for thirty years, and her cure was attributed to prayers from the Jesuits.

26 Fr. Antonio Arbiol, O.F.M., *La religiosa instruída con doctrina de la Santa Escritura y Santos Padres de la Iglesia Católica para todas las operaciones de su vida regular, desde que recibe el santo hábito hasta la hora de su muerte* (Madrid: Thomas Rodríguez Frías, 1734), 633–34. As cited in Elías Trabulse, *La muerte de Sor Juana*, p 23.

27 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas, Ms. fols. 55, 94, 95. Trabulse, *La muerte de Sor Juana*, 30–32. See also José Ignacio de Cabrera, *Gloriosa exaltación de la mística piedra maravilla. Sermón fúnebre que en las honras de la R.M. Sor María Petra Trinidad, religiosa laica del convento de Señor San José de Gracia y pobres Capuchinas de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Mexicana, 1762).

28 AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 212. Opúsculos históricos, Ms. We know that this chronicle was written by Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt.

29 Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*. In *Teatro Mexicano* (Mexico: Doña Maria de Benavides, Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1698) [1697], 4, 26; Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 157.

30 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 473.

31 *Memorias de Sor Mariana, fundadora y abadesa del monasterio de religiosas Capuchinas* (Mexico: María Fernández de Jáuregui, 1808), 26.

32 Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto, monja profes de velo negro y hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta de Antuerpia de los herederos de la Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón 1689), 21v–22.

33 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 164, 290; Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 26

34 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 116.

35 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 165. See also Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 216–20.

36 UT, NLBC, Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio, Ms. fols. 8v through 10, for all preceding quotations.

37 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, O.C.D., *Tesoro escondido en el Santo Carmelo Mexicano. Mina rica de ejemplos y virtudes en la historia de los Carmelitas descalzos de la provincia de Nueva España* (México: Probusa y Universidad Iberoamericana, 1984), 316.

38 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 462, 471, 473.

39 UT, NLBC, Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre Maria Magdalena Lorravaquio, fols. 6v through 8v.

40 Joseph Bellido, *Vida de la M.R.M. Maria Anna Agueda de S. Ignacio*. . . . (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Mexicana, 1758), 152. The discharge of blood by the body was believed to be very good for maintaining or recovering health. See Juan de Cárdenas, *Problemas y secretos maravillosos de las Indias* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988), 245.

41 Bellido, *Vida*, 131–42.

42 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 326. He describes quite accurately all sorts of diseases and treatments, such as the incision of tumors. See 332, 333, 336.

43 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 1, exp. 30. Records of medication and pharmaceutical usage are very rare.

44 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 4, exp. 5. Mastic is the exudate of the mastic tree. See Salazar Simarro, “Salud y enfermedad en el mundo de Sor Juana. De la clausura.” In *Sor Juana y su mundo: una mirada actual. Memorias del Congreso Internacional*, coord. Carmen Beatriz López-Portillo (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana/UNESCO/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), 399–409.

45 AGN, BN, Leg. 649, exp. 6.; Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 123, 334. An ointment made with lemon juice for an unknown disease was prescribed for a nun.

46 AGN, BN, Leg. 1151.

47 AINAH, FF, Vol. 105, fol. 50.

48 AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fol. 179.

- 49 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 102–4.
- 50 AINAH, FF, Vol. 199, fol. 179; Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 344. Pueblan Carmelite Isabel Francisca de la Natividad was eulogized for carrying out her nursing cares punctually, providing medications and well-seasoned hot meals, and teasing the appetite of those reluctant to eat, to keep them alive.
- 51 Salazar Simarro, “Salud y enfermedad en el mundo de Sor Juana,” 399–409. When sick nuns chose to remain in their own cells, they would ask for medications from the infirmary. Dominican María de San José got some oil from the infirmary for one of her sisters in religion who was very ill and alone in her cell. See Kathleen Myers and Amanda Powell, ed. and trans., *A Wild Country Out in the Garden. The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 83.
- 52 AGN, BN, Leg. 1151. Some convents listed additional expenses for other medications, such as “purges.” Information on all convents is found in this source.
- 53 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 185.
- 54 For a complete listing, see Loreto López, *Los conventos*, 151–53.
- 55 Martín González de la Vara, “Origen y virtudes del chocolate.” In *Conquista y comida. Consecuencia del encuentro de dos mundos*, coord. Janet Long, (Mexico: UNAM, 1996), 291–308; Sophie D. Coe, *America’s First Cuisines* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 10–104; Juan de Cárdenas, *Problemas y secretos*, 148–56. Cárdenas believed that chocolate broke the fast.
- 56 Antonio de León Pinelo, *Cuestión moral. Si el chocolate quebranta el ayuno eclesiástico* [1636] (Mexico: Condumex, 1994), 10–11, 99, 110–113, 120, and *passim*.
- 57 Loreto López, “Prácticas alimenticias en los conventos de mujeres,” 485–87.
- 58 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 215–16, 275–76.
- 59 Raymond of Capua, *Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleth Kearns (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980).
- 60 See Bell, *Holy Anorexia*; and Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, *passim*.
- 61 Alison Weber, “Santa Teresa, Demonologist.” In *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain*, ed. Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 171–95.
- 62 AINAH, Colección Chávez Orozco, Vol. 30, Cayetano Antonio de Torres, Directorio para las novicias de este convento de S. Felipe de Jesús y Pobres Capuchinas de Mexico, Ms. fol. 294.
- 63 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 97.
- 64 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas, Ms. fols. 112–13. For a detailed analysis of Sor Sebastiana’s use of discipline and hagiographical interpretation of her body, see Kristine Ibsen, *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 85–96.
- 65 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 305.
- 66 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas, fols. 112–13, 328, 350–52, 355. Not surprisingly, she died before she was 50.
- 67 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 108.
- 68 Fr. Agustín de la Madre De Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 212.
- 69 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 27, 97, 116, 130; Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo* 277, 343.
- 70 Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*, 18v, 22v.
- 71 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 78. Before professing and throughout her early youth, this nun had adopted a voluntary plan for fasting at home, quite conscious of its significance in religious life. See 23–25.
- 72 San Ignacio de Loyola, *Ejercicios Espirituales* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 1986), 15–16.
- 73 P. Diego Calleja, S.J., *Vida de Sor Juana* (México: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1936), 39–41. “Only her director, to whom it was not possible or good to hide them, knew the harsh rigors which she used with herself.” “Asked how was Mother Juana doing, Núñez answered: ‘It is imperative to mortify her [by ordering] not to mortify herself too much with a heavy hand, so that she does not lose her health and impair herself. Juana Inés does not walk in virtue, she flies.’”
- 74 Antonio Núñez, S.J., *Distribución de las obras ordinarias y extraordinarias del día para . . . el estado de las señoras religiosas* (México: Viuda de Miguel Ribera Calderón, 1712), 8–9.
- 75 Juan Benito Díaz de Gamarra y Dávalos, *Ejemplar de religiosas. Vida de la muy reverenda madre Sor María Josefa Lino de la Santísima*

Trinidad (1745–1783) (Mexico: Imprenta de Alejandro Valdez, 1831), 54–58. The printing date suggests that penitence, as practiced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was not necessarily in decline as an exemplary exercise.

⁷⁶ Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 109. See also the early forms of disciplines taken as a lay youth by Mother María de San José. See Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 24–25.

⁷⁷ BN, Mexico, Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas, fol. 217.

⁷⁸ See Chapter 3 for examples of books of spiritual exercises and the prescription of body discipline.

⁷⁹ Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, fol. 167v.

⁸⁰ LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 77v.

⁸¹ LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fols. 78r–79.

⁸² LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fols. 85–85v.

⁸³ See Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

⁸⁴ Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 71.

⁸⁵ Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 27, 97. Vetancurt also wrote the biographies of several nuns of Santa Clara of Atrixco. There he also stresses the use of cilicios, the dedication to fasting, and the general humility of the nuns. See AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 212, Opúsculos históricos.

⁸⁶ BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas, fols. 328–31.

⁸⁷ Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*, 21v.

⁸⁸ Alonso Calvo, S.J. *Compendio de las ejemplares vidas del P. José de Guevara de la Compañía de Jesús y de su tía la Sra. Da. Leocadia González Aranzamendi naturales de la imperial ciudad de Mexico* (Madrid, S.N. 1754), 34–35, and passim.

⁸⁹ Bellido, *Vida*, 69, 81. She may have been following the example of Saint Catherine of Siena. See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 171–72.

⁹⁰ Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras Completas* (México: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1969), 96–1023, 1024, 1025, 1027.

⁹¹ Juan de Ortega y Montañés, *Reglas y Constituciones que por autoridad apostólica deben observar las religiosas Gerónimas del convento de San Lorenzo de Mexico* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de F. Rodríguez Lupercio, 1707), 116. This convent had monthly chapters. Juan Fernández Cejudo, *Llave de oro para abrir las puertas del cielo. La Regla y Ordenaciones de las monjas de la Inmaculada Concepción de Nuestra Sra. de la Madre de Dios* (Mexico, 1815). According to this source, chapters were to be held three times a week.

⁹² *Regla y Constituciones para las religiosas recoletas Dominicas del monasterio de Santa Rosa de Santa María* (Puebla: Oficina del Real Seminario Palafoxiano, 1789), 103. The prescription for coarse bread (*pan basto*) may imply whole wheat rather than white bread.

⁹³ *Reglas y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de los conventos de Nuestra Sra. de la Concepción y la Santísima Trinidad de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: M. de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1795), 109; *Reglas y Constituciones de las religiosas de Santa Brígida* (Mexico: Imprenta Imperial de Valdés, 1822), 9, 19; Juan B. Méndez, *Regla de N.P.G San Agustín y Constituciones de las religiosas del Sagrado Orden de Predicadores* (Mexico: Herederos de la viuda de F.R. Lupercio, 1730), 17; *Regla primitiva y Constituciones de las religiosas descalzas de la Orden de la gloriosa Virgen María del Monte Carmelo* (Valencia: F. Brusola, 1816), 68; BN Madrid, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Regla y Constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de los conventos de Nuestra Sra. de la Concepción*, Ms. 3877, fols. 250–53.

⁹⁴ Fernández Cejudo, *Llave de oro*, 91

⁹⁵ AGI, Mexico, 316; Antonio Rubial García, “Un caso raro. La vida y desgracias de Sor Antonia de San Joseph, monja profesa en Jesús María.” In *El Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español. Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 351–57.

⁹⁶ Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 84.

⁹⁷ Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, passim; AINAH, Colección Antigua, Vol. 212. Santa Clara de Atrixco. Sor Leonor de San Iván lived to be eighty, and fifty-nine years as a nun, while Sor María de la Santísima Trinidad spent sixty-one years in the convent. Also remarkable were Sor Isabel de San Gregorio, who lived fifty-seven years as a nun, and Sor Beatriz de San Buenaventura, Sor Elvira de la Ascensión, and Sor Elvira de San Pedro who, respectively, lived fifty years as nuns.

⁹⁸ Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 276–81, 288–93.

⁹⁹ AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2756.

¹⁰⁰ Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 276, 301, 326, 334.

¹⁰¹ Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 38, 39; Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 234, 332, 334, 336.

102 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*; Franco, *Segunda parte*, 464, 475.

103 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 266–68; Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 222–26.

104 Juan José Eguiara y Eguren, *La mujer edificativa. Panegírico fúnebre . . . en las honras de la M.R. Madre Augustina Nicolasa María . . .* (Mexico: Imp. Nueva de la Bibliotheca Mexicana, 1755), 16.

105 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 224–25; Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 64, 73, 97, 99, 101, 112, 120. Some of the phrases used for a happy death are, “to enjoy the rest” (*gozar del descanso*); “the time came to enjoy the eternal favors” (*llegó el tiempo de gozar de los favores eternos*); “the time came for her to enjoy the prize for her virtues” (*llegóse el tiempo de que gozase el premio de sus virtudes*); “she left to enjoy the spiritual joy of the celestial paradise” (*fue a gozar de la alegría espiritual al paraíso celestial*). Traditionally, nuns made arrangements for their death and had similar expectations. See Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent. The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini, 1395–1436*, ed. and trans. Daniel Ornstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

106 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 120. See also, 4, 11, 24, 68, 73.

107 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 449.

108 Ibid., 475–79.

109 Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*, 50–51.

110 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 103–104.

111 Ventancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 30. Leonor de la Ascensión instructed the nuns in their duties after she announced her own death.

112 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 80, 111.

113 Juan Antonio de Mora, *Espejo crystalino de paciencia y viva imagen de christo crucificado en la admirable vida y virtudes de la venerable madre Sor María Inés de los Dolores* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de M. Rivera y Calderón, 1729), 108–9; Franco, *Segunda parte*, 458, 464, 467, 469.

114 Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*, 24–25; Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 326.

115 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 167.

116 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 228–30.

117 Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonio de San Jacinto*, 52v–53. María de los Angeles Rodríguez Alvarez, *Usos y costumbres funerarias en la Nueva España* (Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán/El Colegio Mexiquense, 2001), 191–99. She describes a rare surviving túmulo in Toluca that is presumed to have been used for the burial of Carmelite nuns.

118 Fr. Joseph Bellido, *Vida de la M.R.M María Anna Agueda*, 143–48.

119 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 166.

120 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 104; Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*, passim.

121 Franco, *Segunda parte*, 477–79.

122 Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida. Hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (Mexico: UNAM-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), 189–90, citing Rosalva Loreto López.

123 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

124 AHSSA, JM, Leg. 11, exp. 12

125 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 167.

126 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 106.

127 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 268–69.

128 Ramos Medina, *Místicas y descalzas*, 231. The origin of this belief is firmly based in the Middle Ages.

129 Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroicas de la Madre María de Jesús religiosa profesa en el convento de la Limpia Concepción . . . de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1676); Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida*, 165–201. See also Ronald J. Morgan, *Spanish American Saints and the Rhetoric of Identity, 1600–1810* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002); Rosalva Loreto López, “La pruebas del milagro en el proceso de beatificación de la Madre María de Jesús en los siglos XVIII y XIX.” In *Historia de la Iglesia en el siglo XIX*, comp. by Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: El Colegio de México, El Colegio de Michoacán, Instituto Mora, UAM-IZTAPALAPA, Condumex, 1998), 351–68.

¹³⁰ Antonio Rubial García, “Cuerpos milagrosos. Creación y culto de las reliquias novohispanas,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 18 (1998): 13–30.

¹³¹ Sebastián de Santander, *Sermón fúnebre que en las honras de la venerable Madre Jacinta María Anna de San Antonio, religiosa de el monasterio de Santa Catarina de Sena . . . predicó el M.R.P.M.F. Sebastian de Santander* (Oaxaca: Doña Francisca Flores, 1720).

CHAPTER SEVEN

EPIGRAPH: Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, *Puntos que el señor obispo de la Puebla de los Angeles, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza deja encargados y encomendados a las almas a su cargo, al tiempo de partirse de esta provincias a los reynos de España* (Puebla: Impreso por el Bachiller Juan Blanco de Alcaçar, n.d.).

1 The danger of *devociones* was mentioned by Marquis of Mancera to his successor the Duke of Veraguas in 1673. See *Instrucción que de orden del Rey dió el Virrey de Mexico, D. Antonio Sebastián de Toledo, Marqués de Mancera a su sucesor, el Exmo. Sr. d. Pedro Nuño Colón, el Duque de Veraguas, en 22 October 1673*. In *Instrucciones que los Virreyes de Nueva España dejaron a sus sucesores*, 2 vols. (Mexico, 1873), 1:135. He assumed that while policing the nunneries was the task of their prelates, the royal government was not exempt from guarding the decorum of those institutions. See also Archbishop Payo de Ribera's condemnation of the *devociones* at Jesús María, in 1672. AGN, BN, Leg. 101, exp. 3, 4 5 (1672). Autos de las Visitas [de] D Fr. Payo de Ribera, Arzobispo de Mexico

2 Carmen Martín Gaité, *Love Customs in Eighteenth Century Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 1–16; María Helena Sánchez Ortega, *La mujer y la sexualidad en el Antiguo Régimen* (Madrid: Akal Universitaria, 1992). She does not delve deeply into nuns' devotions but gives abundant evidence of sexual mores in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. See also by her, "Un sondeo en la historia de la sexualidad sobre fuentes inquisitoriales." In *Inquisición Española: Nueva visión, nuevos horizontes*, ed. J. Pérez Villanueva (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1980), 917–30.

3 BN, FF, Box 75, Leg. 1259, fols. 15–16. See also fols. 17–18. Patente de Fr. Francisco de Avila, dated March 13, 1683, on bad practices in convents.

4 AINAH, FF, Vol. 109, fol. 20 (June 5, 1720).

5 For the origin of enclosure and its relations with the preservation of nuns' chastity and their protection from worldly temptations, see Elizabeth Makowski, *Canon Law and Cloistered Women. Periculoso and Its Commentators, 1298–1545* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1997), 75–79. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Stephen Haliczer, *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ricardo Sez, "La transgression de l'interdit amoureux: Le prêtre, la femme et l'enfant dans l'archevêché de Toledo (1565–1620)." In *Amours légitimes, amours illégitimes en Espagne, XVI–XVII siècles*, ed. Agustín Redondo (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985), 124–27. Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 124–27. Confessors had earned a bad reputation as keepers of their spiritual daughters, reflected in the literature of the medieval period. See Graciela S. Daichman, *Wayward Nuns in Medieval Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 40–44.

6 Makowski, *Canon Law*, passim.

7 Sperling, *Convents*, 147–53, 157–58. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Venetian nuns' enclosure and chastity were violated often enough to move ecclesiastical authorities to take measures to tighten access to nuns. Their efforts to impede visitors from the nunneries' parlors were a failure, and several trials against nuns and their lovers took place in that period. See also Craig Herline and Eddy Put, *A Bishop's Tale. Mathias Hovius Among his Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 214–30.

8 Haliczer, *Sexuality*, 42–62. This papal decision was reiterated in 1605 and 1622.

9 Ibid., 149–82.

10 Ibid., 155.

11 Sánchez Ortega, *La mujer y la sexualidad*, 30–35, 42–64. See also Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

12 In Mexican historiography only a few authors have written on the topic. See Solange Alberro et al., *Seis ensayos sobre el discurso colonial relativo a la comunidad doméstica. Matrimonio, familia y sexualidad a través de los cronistas del siglo XVI, el Nuevo Testamento y el Santo Oficio de la Inquisición* (Mexico: Departamento de Investigaciones Históricas, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1980); Sergio Ortega, ed., *De la santidad a la perversión o de por qué no se cumplía la ley de Dios en la sociedad novohispana* (Mexico: Editorial Grijalbo, 1985); Jorge René González Marmolejo, "El delito de solicitación en el Obispado de Puebla durante el siglo XVIII. Tesis. Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Mexico, 1982). Also by him, *Sexo y confesión. La Iglesia y la penitencia en los siglos XVIII y XIX en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Conaculta-INAH/Plaza y Valdés, Editores, 2002), and "Correspondencia amorosa de clérigos del siglo XVIII: El caso de José Ignacio Troncoso y María de Paula de la Santísima Trinidad." In *Amor y desamor en Nueva España*, ed. Sergio Ortega et al. (Mexico: UNAM, 1999), 155–80; Antonio Rubial García, "Un caso raro. La vida y desgracias de Sor Antonia de San Joseph, monja profesa en Jesús María." In *El Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español: Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 351–57; Georges Baudot and María Agueda Méndez, *Amores prohibidos. La palabra condenada en el México de los Virreyes* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1997). Jorge René González does not discuss nuns in his recent book on sex in the confessionals. In this chapter I focus on nuns and their confessors.

13 Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroycas de la Madre María de Jesús, religiosa profesa en el convento de la Limpia Concepción . . . de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Vda. de Bernardo Calderón, 1676), 30. She suffered many temptations against chastity, attributed to Lucifer, such as visions of naked men and lascivious youths that enticed her to commit dishonest acts.

14 Geroges Bataille, *El erotismo* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 2002), 227–45.

15 The number of cases of sexual transgression between nuns and friars is limited. See for other examples not studied here, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico, Inquisición, Vol. 177, exp. 1 [1590]; Vol. 985, exp. 2; Vol. 249, exp. 1, Vol. 923, exp. 1 [1745], Vol. 1075, exp. 6 [1763].

- 16 Serge Gruzinski, "Individualization and Acculturation: Confession Among the Nahuas of Mexico from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century. In *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 96–117.
- 17 The Counter-Reformation Church reinforced the ties of matrimony among the laity in an effort to confer greater solemnity to the role of the church as a definer of proper sexual relationships. After the Council of Trent no valid marriage could be performed without the presence of a priest, and conjugal as well as extramarital sexual relations were carefully redefined. Profession implied the spiritual marriage of nuns to Christ. As brides of Christ, they were closely watched, since their marriage was of the highest sacred nature. See Jorge René González M., "Diferencias y similitudes entre los ritos del matrimonio espiritual y el matrimonio sacramental." In *Comunidades domésticas en la sociedad novohispana. Memorias del IV Simposio de Historia de las Mentalidades*, 79–88 (Mexico: INAH, 1994).
- 18 AINAH, Colección Gómez Orozco, Vol. 30, Cayetano Antonio Torres, Directorio para las novicias de este convento de S. Felipe de Jesús y Pobres Capuchinas de Mexico, Ms. fol. 338.
- 19 Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex, Crime, and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 72 and ff. The description of a nun's destiny as bride, servant, and daughter of God embodied in Jesus Christ posed potential antithetical roles. A certain air of incest pervades the notion of daughter-bride. The fact that Christ had a host of brides could also kindle the irreverent thought of a harem of a spiritual kind. The only way to solve the polyvalence of these roles was to assume that, in real life, they could alternate without invading each other's meaning. The church always resorted to symbolism as explanation. Metaphorical meanings explained relationships and placed them beyond and above human reality. In regard to the sexual violation of a virginal nun, the *Siete Partidas*, the thirteenth-century Spanish legal code, defined it as "yerro et maldad muy grande" (a mistake and a great wickedness). When a man ravished a nun, all his properties would pass to the nunnery to which she belonged. See *Las Siete Partidas del Rey Don Alfonso el Sabio*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1807), 3:662–63.
- 20 *Regla y Constituciones de las religiosas Gerónimas del convento de San Lorenzo de la ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1707), 18–20, 38.
- 21 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo. Crónica del primer convento de Carmelitas descalzas en Puebla, 1604–1704* (Mexico: Universidad Ibero Americana/Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 1992), 378.
- 22 Fr. Antonio Arbiol, O.F.M., *La religiosa instruida con doctrina de la Sagrada Escritura y Santos Padres de la Iglesia Católica, para todas las operaciones de su vida regular, desde que recibe el santo hábito hasta la hora de su muerte* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Causa de la V.M. María de Jesús de Agreda, 1753), 245–50.
- 23 BN, FF, Martín de Vallarta, Camino de la verdad y instrucción de religiosas, Ms. (1728), fols. 20 and 30.
- 24 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 746, fols. 374–75.
- 25 On the Inquisition, see Richard Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1962). See also, John Chuchiak, "Secrets behind the Screen: solicitantes in the Colonial Diocese of Yucatan and the Yucatec Maya, 1570–1785," In *Religion in New Spain*, ed. Susan Schroeder and Stafford Poole (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 83–109.
- 26 BN Mexico, Cartas Espirituales de Sor Sebastiana Josefa de la Santísima Trinidad, Ms. fol. 55. "My father orders that I write," or "in order to obey Your Paternity." Sor María de Jesús Felipa, in her spiritual diary, writes, "Father . . . I take the pen because I have to obey." See Asunción Lavrin, "La vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: Biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial," *Colonial Latin American Review* 3.4 (1993): 27–52, and "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Obediencia y autoridad en su entorno religioso," *Revista Iberoamericana* 172–73 (Julio-Diciembre, 1995): 602–22.
- 27 AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, Leg. 306; Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, *Colonial Angels. Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico, 1580–1750* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).
- 28 BN, FF, Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, copiada por una religiosa brígida en 1844, Ms. fol. 186.
- 29 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 225.
- 30 BN, FF, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, fols. 196–97.
- 31 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 957 (1758). He asked her whether she had touched her legs and her private parts, called "*la cosita*."
- 32 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 329–30.
- 33 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 552, 2d part., exp. 53 (1717).
- 34 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 729.
- 35 René Millar Carvacho, *La Inquisición de Lima* (1697–1820) (Madrid: Editorial Deimos, 1998), Vol. 3, 385–96, and *Inquisición y sociedad en el Virreinato Peruano* (Santiago: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú/Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 1998), 303–66.
- 36 It is instructive to cite here the case against Fr. Francisco de Castellón, a Franciscan chaplain to the Indian convent of Corpus Christi. He was found to be an inveterate womanizer outside his duties as chaplain, but there is no record that he ever approached any of the women cloistered at Corpus Christi. See AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1322, exp. 9 (1806).

37 For one interpretation of the sexual charge of confession, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990).

38 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 720, exp. 10, fols. 213–21 (1752).

39 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1385 (1797). Printed in Concepción Company Company, comp., *Documentos lingüísticos de la Nueva España* (Mexico: UNAM, 1994), 623–30.

40 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1385 (1797). Quoted in Company Company, *Documentos lingüísticos*, 628.

41 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 957, exp. 2.

42 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 748, exp. 14 (1712).

43 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1385, exp. 14. Fr. Ignacio had also solicited Sor Manuela del Corazón de María, another nun in Santa Clara, and written love poems to a young woman in a religious school. For his confession, see Baudot and Méndez, *Amores prohibidos*, 111–20.

44 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1386, exp. 15 (1791).

45 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1338, exp. 3, fols. 99–104 (1793).

46 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 610, exp. 8. Juan de Ortega y Montañés, future Bishop of Durango and Guatemala, and Archbishop of Mexico, was the Inquisitor who took Sor Catalina’s confession.

47 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 552, exp. 53 (1717–18).

48 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 186.

49 See Alvaro Huerga, *Historia de los alumbrados*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1986), Vol. 3, *Los alumbrados de Hispanoamérica (1570–1605)*.

50 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 186, fol. 205. “They gave pleasure to the inferior parts” but had much strength and “they did the touching and kissing as if they were two statues.” Another interesting twist to this story is their mutual agreement on how he could confess—if he was ever obliged to—that he had deflowered a nun, who had taken an irrevocable vow of chastity. To avoid another capital sin, Sor Agustina is said to have suggested that he confess having carnal relations with a woman who had taken a vow of chastity, omitting the fact that she was a nun. Sor Agustina was just as involved as the priest in this cover-up and was very removed from the assumption of an innocent woman seduced by a callous man.

51 In his confession, Father Plata, trying to lift up the burden of his guilt, declared to have been obfuscated by the Devil, and also by his belief that Sor Agustina was a “saint” with a special grace (*ciencia infusa*). However, he said he eventually recognized that she was a sinful woman and he was blind and ignorant, fols. 220–21.

52 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 186, fol. 234.

53 Ibid., fol. 200.

54 Ibid., fol. 208.

55 AGN, Vol. 186, passim. The attorney accused her of several charges of pretended special knowledge of divine nature and of her sinful relationship with Father Juan Plata. He described Sor Agustina as “unfortunate, blind, and lost [nun] who had lost the last vestige of the chastity she was bound to guard, giving her body to the lascivious priest, enemy of God, thief of her honor and that of His sacred virgins,” fol. 131. Because she had willingly committed dishonest actions, the attorney called her spoiled and arrogant in her observance of the convent’s discipline (fol. 144) and a liar for having claimed she had special “lights.” The attorney and the Inquisition were especially interested in her “beatitude” claims, which carried special heretical connotations.

56 The loss of virginity was not an unusual issue in colonial Mexico. See essays by Lavrin and Twinam, in Asunción Lavrin, ed., *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets. Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

57 AGI, Mexico, 316 (1693); Antonio Rubial García, “Un caso raro. La vida y desgracias de Sor Antonia de San Joseph, monja profesa en Jesús María,” 351–57.

58 Antonio Rubial García, *Una monarquía criolla. La provincia agustina en el siglo XVII* (Mexico: Conaculta, 1990).

59 Antonio de Robles, *Diario de sucesos notables*, 3 vols. (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1972), 2:19, 140.

60 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 722, fols. 369–402.

61 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 1372, fol. 33.

62 Company Company, *Documentos lingüísticos*, 615. “Que terrible ceguedad/ cometí, que fiero error/ pero el Sacro Redentor/ me llamó con su piedad/ Redentor mío, perdonad/ aquella mal intensidad/ que ymaginó mi pasión./ Ya señor a ti bolví/ con fina pasión fecunda/ ya de la malisia inmunda/

dejé su senda malvada/ tu sacra pasión sagrada/ me animado por segunda. . . . Allé tu asilo glorioso/ tu favor me quepa en suerte/ de nuevo vuelvo a quererte/ con todo mi corazón/porque en esta religión/ sea tu esclava hasta la muerte.

63 Baudot and Méndez, *Amores prohibidos*, 115, 116.

64 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 330.

65 Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “The Politics of Location of the Tenth Muse of America: Interview with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.” In *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), 136–65, and *Sor Juana’s Second Dream. A Novel* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999). For a dissenting view, see Ilan Stavans, “Introduction” to *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Poems, Protest, and a Dream*, trans. Margaret Sayers Paden (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xxviii–xxix.

66 Arbiol, *La religiosa instruída*, 250.

67 Arbiol, *La religiosa instruída*, 594–99.

68 See Chapters 2, 7, 9.

69 Fr. Felix de Jesús María, *Vida virtudes y dones sobrenaturales de la Ven. Sierva de Dios, Sor María de Jesús, religiosa profesada en el V. monasterio de la Inmaculada Concepción de Puebla de los Angeles en las Indias Occidentales, sacada de los procesos formados para la causa de su beatificación y canonización* (Roma: Impr. Joseph y Phelipe de Rossi, 1756), 275.

70 AGN, Inquisición, Leg. 1319, exp. 6 [1785–94].

71 Secular priests received similar sanctions for these offenses. See William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred. Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 182–89.

72 AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 5, exp. 4 (1564); Vol. 8, exp. 1 (1568); Vol. 166, exp. 5 (1598); Vol. 718, exp. 10 (1701); Vol. 722, fols. 369–402 (1703); Vol. 1172, exp. 7, 116–307; Vol. 1029, exp. 6, fols. 181–193v.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EPIGRAPH: Sermón de Don Joseph Victoriano Baños y Domínguez . . . en el aniversario de la M.R.M. Sor María Teodora de San Agustín, fundadora y abadesa vitalicia del convento de Santa María de los Angeles de pobres descalzas Indias de la ciudad de Antequera del valle de Oaxaca [1799]. In Luis Castañeda Guzmán, *Templo de los príncipes y monasterio de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles* (Oaxaca: Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Culturas, 1993), 93. This chapter is a revised version of “Indian Brides of Christ: Creating New Spaces for Indigenous Women in New Spain,” *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos*, 15.2 (Summer 1999): 225–260. It received the MACLAS Harold Eugene Davis Prize in 2000.

1 José María Kobayashi, *La Educación como conquista. Empresa Franciscana en Mexico* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1974), 239–92; Jerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, 4 vols. (México: Ed. S.C. Hayhoe, 1945), 1:52, 171 and ff. The idea of an enclosure for indigenous women was first put forward by a royal official, Rodrigo de Albornoz, in 1525.

2 Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Historia de la educación en la época colonial: El mundo indígena* (Mexico: El Colegio de México, 1990), 111. See 80–84 for indigenous women’s schools. For further information on indigenous women in Mexico, prior to the conquest and during the sixteenth century, see S. María J. Rodríguez, *La mujer azteca* (Toluca: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Mexico, 1991); Susan Schroeder, Stephanie Wood, and Robert Haskett, eds., *Indian Women of Early Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

3 Kobayashi, *La educación*, 318–341.

4 Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en la Nueva España. Educación y vida cotidiana* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1987), 75.

5 María del Mar Graña Cid, “Mujeres y educación en la pre-reforma castellana: Los colegios de doncellas.” In *Las sabias mujeres. Educación, saber y autoría (siglos III–XVII)*, ed. María del Mar Graña Cid (Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayba, 1994), 117–46.

6 Robert Ricard, *La conquista espiritual de Mexico* (Mexico: Editorial Jus-Editorial Polis, 1947), 208; Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en la Nueva España*, 71–83.

7 Kobayashi, *La educación*, 280–92.

8 Louise Burkhart, “Mexican Women on the Home Front: Housework and Religion in Aztec Mexico.” In Schroeder et al., *Indian Women*, 25–52.

9 Conzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en la Nueva España*, 213–14; Donald Chipman, “Isabel de Moctezuma: Pioneer of *Mestizaje*.” In *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America*, ed. David G. Sweet and Gary B. Nash (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 214–27.

10 *Concilio III Provincial Mexicano* (Mexico: Eugenio Maillefert y Compañía, Editores, 1859), Book 3, Title 13, Section 7, 282. This order intended to preclude any trace of simony. There is no reliable information on mestizas in New Spain’s convents. In Cuzco, indigenous women were allowed to profess in the convents of Santa Clara as white-veiled nuns, but they had neither voice nor vote in the affairs of the convent. See Kathryn Burns, “Conventos, criollos, y la economía espiritual del Cuzco, siglo XVII.” In *Memoria del II Congreso Internacional del Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español: Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 311–30. By the same author, see “Nuns, *Kurakas*, and Credit: The Spiritual Economy of Seventeenth-Century Cuzco,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 6.2 (1997): 185–203; “Gender and the Politics of *Mestizaje*: The Convent of Santa Clara in Cuzco, Peru,” *HAHR* 78.1 (February 1998): 5–44; *Conventual Habits. Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). This convent was founded in 1550 to shelter the mestiza daughters of the conquistadors, just as the first shelter for mestizas in New Spain had been conceived for the same purpose.

11 The foundation of the convent of Santa Clara, in Querétaro, by cacique Diego de Tapia is an exception to the rule of exclusion of Indians from nunneries. Tapia demanded that his only daughter, Luisa, be admitted and appointed abbess until her death, at which time the convent could elect the Mother Superior following its own dictates. At the time of foundation Tapia did not make any demands for the admission of other Indian women. This premise was accepted by the citizens and religious authorities of Querétaro, and after Luisa’s death the convent returned its direction to españolas, reaffirming its nature as a convent for white women. Centro de Estudios de Historia de Mexico, Condumex, Fondo 94 CDXC, “Testimonio de Cuaderno de Autos Fundación del convento de Santa Clara de Querétaro.”

12 *Concilio III Provincial Mexicano*, 41. “Indians and mestizos should not be admitted to the sacred orders except under the greatest and most careful decision, and never those stained by some infamy.” Stafford Poole, C.M., *Pedro Moya de Contreras: Catholic Reform and Royal Power in New Spain, 1571–1591* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 128–29, 152, and “Church Law and the Ordination of Indians and *Castas* in New Spain,” *HAHR* 61 (November 1981): 637–50.

13 Joseph de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* [1590] (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985), Libro Quinto, Capítulo 15, 240–42.

14 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, O.C.D., *Tesoro escondido en el Santo Carmelo Mexicano. Mina rica de ejemplos y virtudes en la historia de los Carmelitas descalzos de la provincia de Nueva España* (Mexico: Probusa/Universidad Iberoamericana, 1984), 380.

15 Stafford Poole, C.M., *Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Origin and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531–1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), *passim*; D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix. Our Lady of Guadalupe: Image and Tradition Across Five Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); William B. Taylor, “The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion,” *American Ethnologist* 14.1 (February 1987): 9–33; Margarita Ires, “Los milagros de la Virgen de Guadalupe. Su proceso de construcción y representación en el Mexico pasado y contemporáneo,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 10.2 (Summer 1994): 281–313.

16 Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 38, 88–89, 101–55.

17 James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest. A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth*

Centuries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 226–29. There were rural confraternities for women. See AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Leg. 585. *Cabeceras* were the heads of a rural administrative unit, and *sujetos* were its dependent smaller towns.

18 Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions that Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain* [1629], ed. and trans., Ross Hassig and Richard Andrews (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984); María Cristina Silberman, “Idolatrias de Oaxaca en el siglo XVIII.” In *Actas, 36 Congreso Internacional de Americanistas*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1964), 2:111–23.

19 José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo del muy religioso convento de San José, de religiosas Carmelitas descalzas de la ciudad de Puebla de los Angeles* [1732] (Mexico: Gobierno del estado de Puebla/ Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992), 462–63; Francisco de Florencia, S.J., *La milagrosa invención de un tesoro escondido en un campo que halló un venturoso cacique* (Mexico: Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1685). Juan Aguila, an Otomí principal Indian, was reputed to have seen the Virgin and found an image of Our Lady of the Rosary that was worshiped in her sanctuary by the middle of the seventeenth century.

20 Asunción Lavrin, “La vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: Biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 3–4 (1993): 27–52.

21 Francisco de Pareja, *Crónica de la Provincia de la Visitación de Ntra. Sra. de la Merced Redención de Cautivos de la Nueva España* [1688], 2 vols. (Mexico: Imprenta de J.R. Barbedillo y Ca., 1882), 2:452–58.

22 Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Santiago de Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España* [1645] (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900), 494–97.

23 Fr. Francisco de Pareja, *Crónica*, 2:452–58.

24 Irving A. Leonard, *Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora: Un sabio mexicano del siglo XVII* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984), 102–8; Kathleen Ross, *The Baroque Narrative of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. A New World Paradise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). As Ross points out, Sigüenza established links between Roman, Christian, and Indian virgins in the opening chapter of his book, thus elevating the Mexican indigenous past to the same historical category of recognized European traditions.

25 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos y poderosos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnifico real convento de Jesús María de Mexico* [1684] (Mexico: UNAM-Conдумex, 1995), 171–74; Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 384.

26 Equally, there are examples of mistreatment. The treatment of servants depended on the character of the individuals involved and not on the assumption of social prescriptives. See chapter 5. Incidents of tensions between mistresses and servants are narrated by Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto, monja profesada de velo negro y hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta de Antuerpia de los Herederos de la Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1689).

27 Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental*, 174–77.

28 Ibid., 180–81. According to the biographer, this nun called Indians *in-diezuelas*, a diminutive that may signify endearment in this instance, but that could also be interpreted as a form of addressing conventual servants as minors. Tolerance as well as physical punishment of servants is found in nuns’ biographies. See Francisco Pardo, *Vida y virtudes heroycas de la Madre María de Jesús, religiosa profesada en el convento de la Limpia Concepción de la Virgen María. N. Señora de la ciudad de los Angeles* (Mexico: Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1676); Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*. See also AHSSA, JM, Leg. 4, exp. 1, for an example of an early-seventeenth-century account in the convent of Jesús María.

29 This letter-report to the king has been published under several names. See *El libro de las virtudes del Indio* with a prologue by Federico Gómez de Orozco (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, no date); Francisco Sánchez-Castañer, ed., *Juan de Palafox y Mendoza: Tratados Mexicanos* (Madrid: Atlas, 1968), 154–59.

30 Palafox, *Libro de las virtudes del Indio*, 40. He cited at least one example of a principal woman of Cholula, Juana de Motolinía, a maiden of recognized social credit who raised young women at her expense, all of whom lived in great virtue.

31 Antonio de Paredes, *Carta edificante en que el P. Antonio de Paredes de la Compañía de Jesús, da noticia de la ejemplar vida, sólidas virtudes, y santa muerte de la hermana Salvadora de los Santos, India Otomí, donada del beaterio de las Carmelitas de la ciudad de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta Real, Colegio de San Ildefonso, 1763). Beaterios were places where women who could not aspire to become nuns for economic or personal circumstances could still carry out a life of piety and devotion. The date of publication is significant in several ways. Only four years later the Jesuits would be expelled from New Spain. It also came after the Jesuits had denied support to the foundation of an Indian nunnery and had begun a process of their own to found a school for Indian girls.

32 Paredes, *Carta edificante*, 35

33 Ibid., 63. Other incidents in her life suggest that her race was problematic to common white folk. A couple who had agreed to have her as the godmother of their unborn child refused to honor the promise, under pressure from the maternal grandmother, “because she thought that her grandson would be held in bad opinion if he were baptized by an Indian woman.” Before the birth, Salvadora predicted that the baby would die, as it happened. Paredes says that everybody was chastened by the experience, recognizing the beata had a special connection with God. The biographer never hinted that her ability as a seer had any demonic connection.

34 Josefina Muriel, *Las Indias caciques de Corpus Christi* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 1963). While Muriel assumes that

this piece was written by the nuns themselves, there is evidence to the contrary. See Mónica Díaz, “Género, Raza y Género Literario en los conventos para mujeres indígenas en el México colonial.” Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University, 2002; and also by her, “The Indigenous Nuns of Corpus Christi: Race and Spirituality.” In *Religion in New Spain*, eds. Susan Schroeder and Stafford Poole (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007) 179–192.

35 Nobility did not necessarily mean wealth, but clear lineage as leaders in their communities. Some of the parents of these nuns were better off than others, but none was overwhelmingly rich. Of Sor Rosa del Loreto’s parents, the writer states that her parents “owned abundant wealth, as is understood among members of that nation, which is nothing more than a middling situation (*mediano acomodo*).” See Muriel, *Las Indias caciques*, 161.

36 Muriel, *Las Indias caciques*, 127, 325, 371.

37 Muriel, *Las Indias caciques*, 295.

38 AGN, Historia, Vol. 109, exp. 2; BN, FF, Leg. 1265, fols. 15–16. There are some variations of the foundation story in these two sources. The most imaginative is that transmitted by Franciscan prelate Fr. Pedro Navarrete. However, it seems that the viceroy had already taken his decision in 1719, when he informed the City Council that some pious patrons had already contributed with alms for the foundation and obtained the blessing of the Archbishop of Mexico City; Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, *Colonial Angels. Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico, 1580–1750*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 76–97.

39 Juan I. Castorena y Ursúa, *Las indias entendidas, por estar religiosamente sacramentadas en el convento y templo de Corpus Christi* (Mexico: S.N., 1725). The viceroy’s patronage seemed to have been tilted toward institutions for women. After returning to Madrid, he mediated in the foundation of the royal school for girls of Santa Rosa Viterbo in Querétaro. See Josefina Muriel, *Crónica del real colegio de Santa Rosa Viterbo* (Querétaro: Gobierno del Estado de Querétaro, 1996), 107–8.

40 See, for example, AINAH, FF, Vol. 91, fols. 184–93, Información de legitimidad, limpieza, vida y costumbres de Petrona Catalina de la Cruz, india principal, 1721.

41 Universidad Iberoamericana, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Acervos Históricos, Copia de las Constituciones y reglas particulares que para el convento de Capuchinas Indias de N. Sra. de los Angeles de esta ciudad . . . hizo y mandó establecer el Illmo. Sr. Dn. Joseph Gregorio Alonso de Ortigosa, Ms. (Antequera, 1782).

42 Delfina E. López Sarrelangue, *La nobleza indígena de Pátzcuaro en la época virreinal* (Mexico: UNAM, 1965), 39; Mercedes Olivera, *Pillis y macehuals: Las formaciones sociales y los modos de producción de Tecali del siglo XII and XVI* (Mexico: Ediciones de la Casa Chata, 1978).

43 For a Jesuit view of women in a northern eighteenth-century mission, see Susan M. Deeds, “Double Jeopardy: Indian Women in Jesuit Mission of Nueva Vizcaya.” In Schroeder et al., *Indian Women*, 255–72.

44 Castorena y Ursúa, *Las Indias entendidas*, passim. This long defense was expressed as one of the required statements on the advisability of publishing a Spanish translation of the biography of the Iroquois convert Catherine Tekakwitha (Catharina Tegakovita). The translation was published in 1724 and it had the obvious intent of offering moral support to the foundation of Corpus Christi. See Juan de Urtassum, S.J., *La gracia triunfante en la vida de Catharina Tegakovita, India Iroquesa* (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1724). Facsimile edition with an introduction by W. Michael Mathers (Mexico: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, S.A., 1994). Castorena y Ursúa’s defense has no pagination in this edition. See also Allan Greer, “Iroquois Virgin: The Story of Catherine Tekakwitha in New France and New Spain.” In *Colonial Saints: Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in the Americas, 1500–1800* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 235–50. I thank Prof. Greer for making a copy of *La gracia triunfante* available to me.

45 BN, FF, Leg. 1265, fol. 30. Carta de Sor María del Sacramento y Sor María de San Juan Crisóstomo, al P. Custodio Fr. Máximo de Navarrete, a fin de que pida a su Santidad un breve para que puedan entrar más españolas que Indias en el convento de Corpus Christi. August 1728.

46 AGN, Reales Cédulas, 43 (1743), fol. 263. While they argued against Indian rule in Corpus Christi, the two Sor Marías and Sor Isabel de San Joseph were maneuvering for the foundation of another Franciscan convent for white nuns in Guadalajara, for which, they claimed, they had found a patron and had the consent of their superiors. However, the Bishop of Guadalajara opposed the foundation.

47 AINAH, FF, Vol. 95, Letters of December 3, 1727 and September 8, 1728.

48 BN, FF, Leg. 1263, fols. 25–26. Carta de Fr. Juan de Alcaraz, Dieguino, y custodio del convento de Corpus Christi.

49 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas espirituales.

50 AGN, Reales Cédulas, Vol. 52, fol. 20. This document also requested the foundation of another convent, owing to the large number of applicants and their own limitation on the number of nuns to profess in the convent; Reales Cédulas, Vol. 63, fol. 263; AGI, Mexico, Leg. 704, 1937. The identity of Diego de Torres remains muddled, since in one source he appears as one of the nuns’ father and in another as an indigenous priest.

51 BN, FF, Leg. 1265, Carta de un clérigo Indio, D. Diego de Torres, al Virrey, Conde de Fuenclara, para que ordene la salida de tres novicias españolas del convento de Corpus Christi, 1743; Carta del Ministro Provincial Fr. Bernardo de Arratia, para que haga salir del convento de Corpus Christi a tres novicias españolas, October 1745.

52 BN, FF, Leg. 1265, Carta del Comisario General, Fr. Pedro Navarrete, al P. Guardián del convento de San Cristóbal, July 1743.

53 BN, FF, Leg. 1265, fols. 15–16.

[54](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 1937; AGN, Reales Cédulas, Vol. 65, 186; BN, FF, Leg. 1265, Carta del Ministro Provincial Fr. Bernardo de Arratia, Octubre 1745; Carta Acordada del Real Consejo de Indias y Real Cédula de 12 de Octubre de 1745.

[55](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 108, fols. 93–94.

[56](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 1937; AGN, Reales Cédulas, Vol. 67, fol. 15; Vol. 68, fol. 161; Vol. 72, fol. 369. Diego de Torres was identified as one of the petitioners.

[57](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 1937.

[58](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 108, fol. 98.

[59](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 108.

[60](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fol. 137

[61](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100. The cédula was received in Mexico City in 1735.

[62](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fols. 135–36; 177, 195–96.

[63](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fols. 111, 127, 133, 178, 204; Asunción Lavrin, “La autoridad cuestionada. Epístolas de una crisis,” *Historias* 55 (Mayo-Agosto 2003): 59–69.

[64](#) AINAH, FF, Leg. 100, fol. 129. In this letter the Abbess Sor Josefa de San Nicolás reported “how ill disposed are our sisters against the Spaniards.” Several times she referred to the Indians as “hermanitas.” Whether this diminutive was sisterly or pejorative is unclear.

[65](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fols. 186–88. Apparently, her isolation was the result of punishment for behavior not explained in the correspondence.

[66](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fol. 137. The letter was addressed to D. Juan de Altamirano, whose rank or identity I have been unable to verify.

[67](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 100, fol. 137. “The Spaniards, my ladies, have several convents in which to serve our Lord, but the poor Indians only two, and see what is happening, that we always live under the fear they would be taken from us.” For further information on the convent, see AHPFM, Fondo Provincia, Sección General Serie Alfabética, cajas 27, 46 and 47.

[68](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 93.

[69](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 95, no folio number; Luisa Zahino Peñafort, “La fundación del convento para Indias cacicas de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de Oaxaca.” In Ramos Medina, coord., *Memoria del II Congreso Internacional del Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español*, 331–37.

[70](#) AINAH, FF, Vol 95.

[71](#) AGN, Reales Cédulas, Vol. 116, fol. 274; Vol. 132, fol. 247.

[72](#) AGN, Temporalidades, Vol. 22, exp. 2.

[73](#) BN, FF, Extracto de las razones en que se funda la solicitud de convertir el Colegio de Ntra. Sra. de Guadalupe de Mexico en convento de religiosas Indias de la Compañía de María Santísima, llamada la Enseñanza.

[74](#) AGN, Colegios, Vol. 8, exp. 2, 3, 4.

[75](#) Michel de Certeau, *La fábula mística: Siglo XVI–XVII* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1993), 239–48, 277–84.

[76](#) AINAH, FF, Vol. 91, fols. 184–93.

[77](#) Muriel, *Las Indias caciques*, 257.

[78](#) See note 67.

[79](#) Díaz, Género, Raza y Género Literario, 60–98; “The Indigenous Nuns of Corpus Christi,” 179–92.

[80](#) Juan Uvaldo de Anguita, *El divino verbo sembrado en la tierra Virgen de María Santísima Nuestra Señora da por fruto una cosecha de vírgenes* (Mexico: Imprenta Real del Superior Gobierno y del Nuevo Rezado de Doña Maria de Rivera, 1743).

[81](#) Canon Hoyos wrote as if Christianity was, still, a new religion to the Indian people. This, in itself, is a telling statement on the lack of confidence that some ecclesiastics had in the quality of the faith among their indigenous flock.

[82](#) Anguita named Fernando Alva Ixtlilxochitl as his source, expressing his appreciation for the historian’s knowledge of the past as well as his stylistic felicity. The early attempts of Fr. Diego Durán to restore dignity to pre-Hispanic beliefs should also be given credit. For Clavigero, see *Historia Antigua de Mexico* (Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliófilos, A.C, 1997). This is a facsimile edition of the original work in Spanish, first published in Italian in 1789.

⁸³ Don Joseph Victoriano Baños y Domínguez, “Elogio fúnebre,” in Luis Castañeda Guzmán, *Templo de los príncipes y monasterio de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles* (Oaxaca: Instituto Oaxaqueño de la Cultura, 1993), 94–95.

CHAPTER NINE

EPIGRAPH: AGI, Mexico, 2753. The nuns of the convent of La Santísima Trinidad of Puebla, May 20, 1773.

1 Isabel Arenas Frutos, *Dos arzobispos de México: Lorenzana y Núñez de Haro ante la reforma conventual femenina (1766–1775)* (León: Universidad de León, 2004), 105–6, 110.

2 Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns. The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 183–84.

3 See Chapter 5; AHPFM, Fondo Provincia, Sección Conventos, Serie Santa Clara, Caja 2, Patente del Mtro. Prov. Fr. Antonio Villalba, Mayo, 1743. Sobre el número de religiosas.

4 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Leg. 101, exp. 4, 5.

5 Arenas Frutos, *Dos arzobispos de México*, 49; Alberto de la Hera, “Notas para el estudio del regalismo Español en el siglo XVIII,” *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* XXXI (1974): 409–40; Jean Sarrailh, *La España Ilustrada de la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957); Vicente Rodríguez Casado, “Política interior de Carlos III,” *Simancas* 1 (1950): 123–86.

6 Nancy M. Farris, *Crown and Clergy in Colonial Mexico, 1759–1821: The Crisis of Ecclesiastical Privilege* (London: Athlone Press, 1968); D. A. Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred. Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

7 Brian Larkin, “The Splendor of Worship: Baroque Catholicism, Religious Reform, and Last Wills and Testaments in Eighteenth Century Mexico City,” *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 8.4 (Fall 1999): 404–42.

8 Sarrailh, *La España ilustrada*, 637–52.

9 Reforming women’s convents had many precedents. See Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms. Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 385–418, 489–525.

10 Francisco Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias diócesanas del Obispado de Puebla* (Puebla: Imprenta del Real Seminario Palafoxiano, 1770), 7.

11 Ibid., 88, 136, 314.

12 Ibid., 207. This edict had important consequences for those liens imposed on cells, often deducted to celebrate religious feasts. Those in place should be honored and paid, but he forbade any new mortgages on the cells.

13 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2753.

14 Arenas Frutos, *Dos arzobispos de México*, 150–53.

15 Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias* [1770], 2–7; Bernard Bobb, *The Vice-Regency of Antonio María Bucareli in New Spain, 1771–1779* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962).

16 Fabián y Fuero, “Carta circular e instrucción que dirigió su Illma. A las R.R.M.M. Superiores de los cinco conventos.” In *Colección de providencias* [1770], 56–67.

17 Fabián y Fuero, “Carta circular de S.S. Illma. a todas las R.R.M.M. Superiores,” November 15 and December 12, 1769. In *Colección de providencias* [1770], 70–80.

18 Fabián y Fuero, “Carta a las R.R.M.M. preladas con varias disposiciones en cuanto a las seculares de los conventos.” In *Colección de providencias* [1770], 84–90.

19 AGI, Mexico, 2753, fol. 128.

20 AGI, Mexico, 2753, fol. 128v. It would have been desirable to have a school for girls such as the one in the convent of San Jerónimo, said the bishop, but it was not feasible. The girls should be interned in schools outside the convents.

21 AGI, Mexico, 2753, fols. 126v and ff.

22 Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias* [1770], 9–35. María Justina Sarabio Viejo, “Controversias sobre la ‘vida común’ ante la reforma monacal femenina en México.” In *El Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español. Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 583–93; Nuria Salazar Simarro, *La vida común en los conventos de monjas de la ciudad de Puebla* (Puebla: Gobierno del Estado, Secretaría de Cultura, 1990).

23 AGN, BN, Leg. 77. Carta a la abadesa de la Concepción.

24 AGN, BN, Leg. 77. Carta de Francisca Teresa de San Miguel to Catarina de San Francisco.

[25](#) AHSSA, JM, Leg. 10, exp. 3. One of the archbishop's subalterns, in a private undated letter to a nun in La Concepción, told her that her abbess had misunderstood *vida común*. The archbishop did not intend the nuns to sweep or wash dishes. They would have servants in common for those tasks, but they should have a single source of money for their expenses, and would eat out of a common pot in a refectory. See AGN, BN, Leg. 77, Carta a la M. Juana del Ssmo. Sacramento.

[26](#) Francisco A. Lorenzana y Buitrón, *Cartas pastorales y edictos* (Mexico: Imprenta del Superior Gobierno de Joseph Antonio de Hogal, 1770), 101. In his exhortation to the nuns of Mexico, he reminded them that poverty was the foundational principle of conventual life, and quoted Saint Brigitte, Saint Clare, Saint Francis, and Saint Benedict, the founders of religious orders, as being in common agreement on this issue.

[27](#) Fabián y Fuero, "Colección de providencias dadas a fin de establecer la santa vida común, Carta de SS. Illma. Al Excmo. Sr. Virrey." In *Colección de providencias* [1770], 101.

[28](#) Arenas Frutos, *Dos arzobispos de México*, 153–62.

[29](#) Miguel A. Álvarez, *A las esposas de Jesu-Christo, vuestras amadas hijas las religiosas del convento de la Concepción de este nuestro obispado* (Antequera: Valle de Oaxaca, 1770), Pastoral Letter dated January 8, 1770, no publisher.

[30](#) AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 20, exp. 2.

[31](#) AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 20, exp. 2, 3, 4; BN, FF, Autos seguidos por la Provincia del Santo Evangelio de Mexico contra el convento de Santa Clara de Puebla, 1700–1774.

[32](#) Francisco Fabián y Fuero, *Colección de providencias diocesanas dadas por el Illmo. y Excmo. Señor, D. Francisco Fabián y Fuero*, 2 vols. (Valencia: Impr. de B. Monfort, 1792–1793), vol. 2, 67.

[33](#) AGN, BN, Templos y Conventos, Leg. 77, Cartas del marqués de Croix a la abadesa de la Concepción, 14 January 1770, 26 January 1770. For a thorough review of the attitudes and decisions taken by the archbishops of Mexico on *vida común*, see Isabel Arenas Frutos, *Dos arzobispos de México*, *passim*.

[34](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 306. In the seventeenth century the discalced Carmelites sought permission to be removed from under the diocesan to that of the Carmelite order, and used a *recurso de fuerza*.

[35](#) Baltasar Ladrón de Guevara, *Manifiesto que el real convento de religiosas de Jesús María, de Mexico . . . hace al Sagrado Concilio Provincial Mexicano* (Mexico: Impr. de D. Felipe Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1771).

[36](#) BN, FF, Representación que la abadesa, vicaria y definidoras del Sagrado y real convento de la Concepción de Mexico, hicieron ante el Concilio celebrado en la ciudad de Mexico, 1771; AGN, Reales Cédulas, 100: 55; 102: 326; BN, FF, Box 76, No. 1276. Real Cédula de 22 enero de 1771 a la abadesa y religiosas del convento de la Concepción. The Council decided to issue this cédula on December 22, 1770.

[37](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2756, No. 17.

[38](#) Condumex, Fondo CXVIII, Defensa legal por el Sagrado convento de religiosas Franciscanas de Santa Clara de la ciudad de los Angeles (1772).

[39](#) BN, FF, Box 76, No. 1275 (1770–74).

[40](#) Bancroft Library, University of California, Tomo Regio al IV Concilio Provincial Mexicano, Ms. Vol. 1, fol. 57. Also, 305–9, 270–71.

[41](#) AGN, Reales Cédulas, 99: 304.

[42](#) Baltasar Ladrón de Guevara, *Manifiesto*, *passim*.

[43](#) BN, FF, Box 76, No. 1276. Representación que la abadesa, vicaria y definidoras del Sagrado y real convento de la Concepción de Mexico hicieron ante el Concilio celebrado en la ciudad de Mexico, 1771; Real Cédula de 22 de enero a la abadesa . . . para que estas ocurran al Concilio.

[44](#) BN Madrid, Juan de Palafox, "Regla y constituciones que han de guardar las religiosas de los conventos de la Concepción," Ms. 3877.

[45](#) Condumex, Fondo CXVIII, Ms. Defensa legal por el Sagrado convento de religiosas Franciscanas de Santa Clara de la ciudad de los Angeles (1772).

[46](#) On the concept of honor, see Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets. Gender, Honor, Sexuality and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Lyman Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, eds., *Sex, Shame and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Steve Stern, *The Secret History of Gender* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[47](#) BN, FF, Box 76, No. 1275.

[48](#) See sequence of events affecting Santa Clara, in Puebla, in AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 20; Nuria Salazar de Garza, *La vida común en los conventos de monjas de la ciudad de Puebla* (Puebla: Gobierno del Estado de Puebla/ Secretaría de Cultura, 1990).

[49](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2756.

- [50](#) AGN, Correspondencia de los Virreyes, Letters of Viceroy Bucareli, Vol. 5, Letter of January 22, 1772. Hereafter cited as Correspondencia, Bucareli.
- [51](#) AGN, BN, Vol. 77; AGI, Mexico, 2752.
- [52](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2753.
- [53](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2756.
- [54](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2752. In a letter to the king on April 27, 1772, Bishop Fabián y Fuero alleged that the screaming nuns were “demented” and though the convent was split on the issue, most nuns wanted vida común. He also suggested that one of the nuns of Santa Inés was a sister of a member of the Audiencia who had assured her that the dissenters would be heard.
- [55](#) AGN, Reales Cédulas, 111:326; AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2753. For detailed documentation on the situation of the convent of San Jerónimo in Puebla, see Alicia Bazarte Martínez and Enrique Tovar Esquivel, comps., *El convento de San Jerónimo en Puebla de los Angeles* (Puebla: Litografía Magno Graf. S.A. de C.V., 2000), 135–75.
- [56](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 77.
- [57](#) AGN, Reales Cédulas, 99:330; 100:55; 101:42; 102:326; BN, FF, Real Cédula de 22 de enero de 1771 a la abadesa y religiosas del convento de la Concepción de Mexico, Box 76, No. 1276.
- [58](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2753, fols. 91–91v. On fols. 116–17, the argument of “natural right” of the nuns is reiterated.
- [59](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 5:187 ff.; 233 ff.
- [60](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 10:36, 38, 45, 51, 57, 63, 67.
- [61](#) AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2752, Informe del virrey sobre el establecimiento de la vida común en Santa Clara de Querétaro, 27 Marzo 1773.
- [62](#) AGN, Templos y Conventos, Vol. 20, exp. 2.
- [63](#) Mariano Echevarría y Veytia, *Historia de la fundación de la ciudad de la Puebla de los Angeles en la Nueva España. Su descripción y presente estado*, 2 vols. (Mixcoac, D.F.: Imprenta Labor, 1931) 2:220.
- [64](#) *La Administración de D. Frey Antonio María de Bucareli y Ursúa*, 2 vols. (Mexico: Publicaciones del Archivo General de la Nación, Vols. XXIX–XXX, 1936), 2:294.
- [65](#) *Ibid.*, 2:296.
- [66](#) AGN, Reales Cédulas, 104:124.
- [67](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:101.
- [68](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:100. This convent was exempted from following vida común due to the inadequacy of its income and the advanced age and poor health of its nuns. See 10:275.
- [69](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:100, 107; D. A. Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 86.
- [70](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7: no pagination; 11:100–3; Bazarte Martínez and Tovar Esquivel, *El convento de San Jerónimo*, 171. There was a second enquiry in San Jerónimo, where the nuns had responded to a previous enquiry with mixed results. In 1774, thirty-eight out of the sixty-four nuns accepted vida común.
- [71](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 76 (1775).
- [72](#) AGN, BN, Vol. 134, Vol. 137; Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11: 192.
- [73](#) AGN, BN. Leg. 76. The novices were hoping to enter as accountant and singer without dowry, but they refused to “endanger” their souls by accepting a “Capuchin” way of life.
- [74](#) AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:192–94.
- [75](#) José Ortega Moro, *Carta a una religiosa para su desengaño y dirección* (Puebla: Imprenta del Seminario Palafoxiano de la Puebla, 1774). Ortega Moro was an unconditional supporter of Bishop Fabián y Fuero.
- [76](#) Bazarte Martínez and Tovar Esquivel, *El convento de San Jerónimo*, 171–74. It is uncertain whether this was a letter or a statement written for religious or civil authorities. Although undated, it must have been written after 1774, since it addresses Más Teóforo’s tract.
- [77](#) AGN, BN, Leg. 77, exp. 43.

- 78 AGN, Reales Cédula concernientes a la vida común, 106:14; 107:471.
- 79 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:13.
- 80 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:218, 229.
- 81 AGN, BN, Vol. 137, *passim*; AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 8: 126.
- 82 AGN, BN, Vol. 137. In this community there were fifty-five nuns, nine lay or white-veiled nuns and twenty-two servants. In addition, there were thirty-one servants for the service of the community. This mixed situation suggests that the nuns had not dismissed their own maids; the number of those used to serve the community was smaller than those serving their mistresses.
- 83 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:1–20.
- 84 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:142–49.
- 85 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:141–51, 194, 198.
- 86 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:20–31.
- 87 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:143.
- 88 AGN, Reales Cédulas, 114, 350. Inquisitor Vallejo was a personal friend of the Bishop of Puebla. See AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:97–98, 100.
- 89 AGN, Reales Cédulas, 119:281.
- 90 AGN, Reales Cédulas, 119:281.
- 91 AGN, Historia, Vol. 136.
- 92 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2752, Duplicado del No. 35.
- 93 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2752, Letters of November 1774. All references to this correspondence are found in this source.
- 94 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:68–83.
- 95 AGI, Mexico, Leg. 2753.
- 96 Stern, *Secret History*, 98–103.
- 97 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:102.
- 98 BN, FF, Box 76, No. 1283; AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 11:101.
- 99 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:81–83.
- 100 Rosalva Loreto López and Ana Benítez Muro, *Un bocado para los Angeles. La cocina en los conventos* (Mexico: Clío, 2000); Mónica Lavín and Ana Benítez Muro, *Dulces hábitos. Golosinas del convento* (Mexico: Clío, 2000).
- 101 AGN Correspondencia, Bucareli, 6:245.
- 102 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 6:233.
- 103 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 7:142–50. See also Doc. 568, dated January 17, 1778.
- 104 Compare the Mexican case with the intent of reform in Peru. See Antonio Ignacio Laserna Gaitán, “El último intento de reforma de los monasterios femeninos en el Perú colonial: El auto del Arzobispo Parada de 1775,” *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 52.2 (1995): 263–87.
- 105 Bancroft Library, Tomo Regio al IV Concilio, 1:307. The royal representative reported that at the Council of Trent, Benedict XIV, Cardinal de Luca, stated that if *vida común* was not observed at the time of a nun’s profession she could not be obliged to follow it.
- 106 M. A. Valdés, ed. *Gazetas de Mexico*, 44 vols. (Mexico, 1784–1821), 5:1 (1792), 9. There were 165 niñas.
- 107 AGN, Correspondencia, Bucareli, 10:203 ff.; 11:118, 121. The reports rendered by the Archbishop of Mexico, the Provincial of the Franciscan Order, and the ecclesiastical cabildo of Oaxaca in 1774 show that, though a large number of girls and seculars had been removed from the cloisters, many remained, due to their age or lack of resources.
- 108 Valdés, *Gazetas de Mexico*, 8:19 (1796–97), 150.
- 109 Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns*, 199–202.

[110](#) Hipólito Villaroel, *Enfermedades políticas que padece la capital de esta Nueva España en casi todos los cuerpos que se compone y remedios que se le deben aplicar para su curación si se quiere que sea útil al rey y al público* (Mexico: Bibliófilos Mexicanos, Segunda Serie, No. 5, 1937), 65.

[111](#) Francisco J. Lizana Beaumont, *Carta Pastoral a las R.R.M.M. Superiores y Súbditas del Arzobispado de Mexico* (Mexico: Imprenta Madrileña, 1803), 27.

[112](#) Juan B. de Arechederreta, *A las R.R.M.M. preladas y religiosas de los conventos sujetos a la filiación ordinaria del Arzobispado de Mexico* (Mexico, 1826), *passim*.

[113](#) See Asunción Lavrin, “The Execution of the Law of Cosolidación in New Spain: Economic Aims and Results,” *HAHR* 53.1 (February 1973): 27–49; “Problems and Policies in the Administration of Nunneries in Mexico, 1800–1835,” *The Americas* 28.1 (July 1971): 57–77, and “Mexican Nunneries from 1835 to 1860: Their Administrative Policies and Relations with the State,” *The Americas* 28.3 (January 1972): 288–310.

[114](#) As cited in Guadalupe Jiménez Codinach, “La plata de Zacatecas, las reformas borbónicas y la independencia novohispana.” In *Las reformas borbónicas y el nuevo orden colonial*, ed. José Francisco Román Gutiérrez (Mexico: INAH, 1998), 101.

CHAPTER TEN

EPIGRAPH: Sor Maria de Jesús Felipa’s diary, August 1758; see Anonymous, Manuscript Diary of a Capuchin Nun. LC, Manuscript Division MM 59.

1 On women’s education, see Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, *Las mujeres en la Nueva España. Educación y vida cotidiana* (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1987); Josefina Muriel, *Crónica del real colegio de Santa Rosa de Viterbo, Querétaro* (Querétaro: Gobierno del Estado de Querétaro, 1996).

2 Rosalva Loreto López, “Leer, contar, cantar y escribir. Un acercamiento a las prácticas de la lectura conventual. Puebla de los Angeles, México, siglos XVII y XVIII,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 23 (2000): 67–95.

3 See Chapter 8.

4 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was reputed to have a large personal library, but her’s was an exceptional example.

5 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18. This legajo contains over two dozen inventories of the late seventeenth century. Mariana de la Santísima Trinidad, of La Encarnación, had twenty-four books at her death in 1686. Leonor de San Juan of the same convent had thirty-three books at her death in 1687.

6 AGN, BN, Leg. 881, exp. 18.

7 Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1992); Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen. A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1998); Clarissa Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

8 See Manuel Serrano y Sanz, *Apuntes para una biblioteca de escritoras españolas*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1903); Ronald E. Surtz, *Writing Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain. The Mothers of Saint Teresa of Avila* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Amy Katz Kaminsky, ed., *Water Lilies. An Anthology of Spanish Women Writers from the Fifteenth Through the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Isabelle Poutrin, *Le voile et la plume. Autobiographie et sainteté féminine dans L’Espagne moderne* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1995); Sherry M. Velasco, *Demons, Nausea, and Resistance in the Autobiography of Isabel de Jesús, 1611–1682* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996); Cristina Segura Graiño, ed., *La voz del silencio. Fuentes directas para la historia de las mujeres (siglos VIII–XVIII)* (Madrid: Asociación Cultural Al-Mudayna, 1992); Jesús Gómez López and Inocente García de Andrés, *Sor Juana de la Cruz: Mística e iluminista toledana* (Toledo: Diputación Provincial, 1982); María Pilar Manero Sorolla, “Visionarias reales en la España áurea.” In *Images de la femme en Espagne aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, coord. Agustín Redondo (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1994), 305–18; Mario Hernández Sánchez-Barba, *Monjas ilustres en la historia de España* (Madrid: Ediciones Temas de Hoy, S.A., 1996); Isaías Rodríguez, O.C.D., *Santa Teresa de Jesús y la espiritualidad española* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1972); Julio Caro Baroja, *Las formas complejas de la vida religiosa. Religión, sociedad y carácter en la España de los siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid: AKAL Editor, 1978), 33; Ángela Muñoz Fernández, *Acciones e intenciones de mujeres. Vida religiosa de las madrileñas (ss. XV–XVI)* (Madrid: hora y HORAS, Editorial, 1995).

9 J. M. Cohen, trans., *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself* (London: Penguin, 1957).

10 See Sherry Velasco, *Demons*, 97.

11 Ángela Muñoz Fernández, *Acciones e intenciones*, 203.

12 On the other hand, in Hispaniola there was a nun-poet, Sor Leonor de Ovando, who was writing elegant poems in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. See Nela Río, “ ‘Me hizo pensar cosa no pensada.’ La poesía de Sor Leonor de Ovando (1548?–1610?).” In *Diálogos espirituales. Letras femeninas Hispanoamericanas. Siglos XVI–XIX*, ed. Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López (Puebla: Universidad de las Américas/Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2006, 386–419.)

13 The first comprehensive anthology of Spanish and Spanish American religious women’s writings was that of Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, *Untold Sisters. Hispanic Nuns in their Own Words* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Josefina Muriel, *Cultura femenina novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1963).

14 This first volume had a long title, and its initial lines read *Inundación Castálida de la única poetisa, Musa Décima, Soror Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Madrid: Juan García Infanzón, 1689). For a facsimile edition, see the edition prepared by Aureliano Tapia Méndez and published in Toluca by the Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura in 1993. Another edition is that of Georgina Sabat de Rivers, published by Clásicos Castalia in Madrid in 1982. In 1690, the Bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, published her *Carta Atenagórica* in Puebla. Her second volume of writings was published in Madrid in 1692 and the third one posthumously, also in Madrid, in 1700. See edition by Juana Inés de la Cruz, Georgina Sabat de Rivers and Elías L. Rivers, published as *Poesía, teatro, pensamiento, lírica personal, lírica coral, teatro, prosa* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 2004).

15 For example, Mariana de Jesús Nazareno wrote an account of her visions under orders of her confessors. José Gómez de la Parra mentions it, but it has not been found. See José Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo. Crónica del primer convento de Carmelitas descalzas en Puebla, 1604–1704* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana/Comisión Puebla V Centenario, 1992), 233; Josefina Muriel, *Cultura femenina novohispana*, 507–10. She cites several private collections holding a good number of writings accessible to very few scholars.

16 Joaquín Ignacio Jiménez de Bonilla, Joseph Francisco de Ozaeta y Oro, and Joseph Francisco de Aguirre y Espinosa, *El segundo quinze de enero de la corte mexicana. Solemnes fiestas que a la canonización del mystico Doctor San Juan de la Cruz, celebró la provincia de San Alberto de Carmelitas descalzos de esta Nueva España* [1730]. Facsimil Edition (Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliófilos, A.C., 2000), 599–601, 678–80.

17 See Chapter 3. I have found two outstanding poems in a manuscript of the Rules for the convent of San Bernardo. Because they are unsigned,

attribution to any nun in the convent is impossible, although the entire manuscript was signed by the teacher of novices, Manuela de San Antonio, 1744. The most one can say is that they were read by the nuns. BN Madrid, Ms. 8135. Los Puntos de la Regla que han de guardar las sorores del convento de N.P.S. Bernardo de Mexico (1744). The poems have been published in Lavrin and Loreto López, *Diálogos espirituales*, 446–50.

18 BN FF Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la S.S. Trinidad, Cartas; LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary. Biographies and funeral eulogies written by ecclesiastics also reveal the ties between confessor and spiritual daughter. See Fr. Juan López Aguado, *Florida huerto de las delicias de Dios. Sermón . . . en las honras de la Madre Luisa de Sta. Catarina, religiosa de . . . Santa Catarina de Sena en la Ciudad de Valladolid* (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1738), 13.

19 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso Occidental plantado y cultivado por la liberal benéfica mano de los muy católicos y poderosos reyes de España nuestros señores en su magnífico real convento de Jesús María de Mexico* (Mexico: UNAM/Conduxmex, 1995), 87v, 137.

20 Jodi Bilinkoff, *Related Lives. Confessors and Their Female Penitents, 1450–1750* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 12–31, 76–95.

21 The break between Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and her confessor Antonio Núñez is the best-known example but by no means an exceptional situation. Aureliano Tapia Méndez, *Autodefensa espiritual. Carta de la Madre Juana Inés de la Cruz, escrita al Rev. Maestro Antonio Núñez de la Compañía de Jesús* (Monterrey: Impresora de Monterrey, 1986); María Dolores Bravo Arriaga, *El discurso de la espiritualidad dirigida. Antonio Núñez de Miranda, confesor de Sor Juana* (Mexico: UNAM, 2001); Josefina Muriel, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y los escritos del Padre Antonio Núñez.” In *Y diversa de mí misma entre vuestras plumas ando. Homenaje internacional a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Sara Poot Herrera (Mexico: El Colegio de Mexico, 1993), 71–83.

22 Kathleen Myers, “Fundadora, cronista y mística, Juana Palacios Berruecos /Madre María de San José (1656–1719).” In *Monjas y beatas. La escritura femenina en la espiritualidad barroca novohispana. Siglos XVII y XVIII*, ed. Asunción Lavrin and Rosalva Loreto López (Puebla: Universidad de las Américas/ Archivo General de la Nación, 2002), 67–110.

23 Asunción Lavrin, “La vida femenina como experiencia religiosa: Biografía y hagiografía en Hispanoamérica colonial,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 3–4 (1993): 27–52.

24 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 104. See Asunción Lavrin, “Sor María de Jesús Felipa: Un diario espiritual de mediados del siglo XVIII.” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 111–60; Asunción Lavrin, “La escritura desde un mundo oculto: Espiritualidad y anonimidad en el convento de San Juan de la Penitencia,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 22 (2000): 49–75.

25 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa Diary, fols. 42–43.

26 Ellen Gunnarsdottir, “Una monja barroca en el Mexico ilustrado: María Ignacia del Niño Jesús en el convento de Santa Clara de Querétaro, 1801–1802.” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Diálogos espirituales*. See also the correspondence of a Franciscan beata in the early eighteenth century, in her *Mexican Karismata. The Baroque Vocation of Francisca de los Angeles, 1674–1744* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

27 Kathleen A. Myers and Amanda Powell, eds. and trans., *A Wild Country Out in the Garden. The Spiritual Journals of a Colonial Mexican Nun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 199). Also by Myers, “Fundadora, cronista y mística, Juana Palacios Berruecos/Madre María de San José (1656–1719).” In *Monjas y beatas*, 67–110, and *Word from New Spain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656–1719)* (Liverpool: University Press, 1993).

28 Myers and Powell, *A Wild Country*, 316–24; Fr. Miguel de Torres, *Dechado de príncipes eclesiásticos, que dibujó con su ejemplar, virtuosa y ajustada vida, . . . D. Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún* [1716] (Mexico: Sociedad Mexicana de Bibliófilos, 1999), 370.

29 Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto . . . hija del real y religiosísimo convento de Santa Clara de Jesús de la ciudad de Santiago de Querétaro* (Mexico: Imprenta de Antuerpia de los Herederos de la Viuda de Bernardo de Calderón, 1689); Asunción Lavrin, “La religiosa real y la inventada: Diálogo entre dos modelos discursivos,” *Historia y Grafía* 14 (2000): 185–206. Also in *La creatividad femenina en el mundo barroco Hispánico. María de Zayas-Isabel Rebeca Correa-Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Monika Bosse, Barbara Potthast, and André Stoll (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1999), 535–58.

30 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido en el Santo Carmelo Mexicano. Mina rica de ejemplos y virtudes en la historia de los Carmelitas descalzos de la provincia de Nueva España* (Mexico: Probusa/Universidad Iberoamericana, 1984), 322–23.

31 Rosalva Loreto López, “Oír, ver y escribir. Los textos hagio-biográficos y espirituales del Padre Miguel Godínez ca. 1630.” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Diálogos espirituales*, 156–200.

32 For Spain, see Stephen Haliczer, *Between Exaltation and Infamy*; Isabelle Poutrin, *La voile et la plume*; Jesús Imirizaldu, *Monjas y beatas embaucadoras* (Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1977); Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *The Visionary Life of Madre Ana de San Agustín* (Woodbridge, UK: Tamesis, 2004).

33 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 306–8.

34 Fr. Joseph Gómez, *Vida de la venerable Madre Antonia de San Jacinto*, 28v.

35 Cesati, Pedro Joseph, *Carta de el P. Pedro Joseph Cesati de la Compañía de Jesús a la Rda. Madre María Nicolasa de los Dolores, priora del convento de San Gerónimo de la ciudad de la Puebla, en que le da noticia de las virtudes de la M. Anna María de S. Joseph, religiosa del mismo convento* (Puebla de los Angeles: n.p., 1752).

36 Miguel Ramón Pinilla, Breve Relación de la vida de la Madre Sor María Antonia de el Espíritu Santo Maldonado, religiosa de velo negro en el convento de la M. S. Clara de la ciudad de Querétaro. Ms. Condumex, Mexico, Fondo 138–1, Siglo XVIII.

37 See Chapters 8 and 9. Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns. The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752–1863* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

38 The most complete set of letters between a religious and her confessors belongs not to a nun, but to a beata. See Ellen Gunnarsdottir, *Mexican Karismata*.

39 The problems of capturing the essence of religious women’s epistles are discussed in Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds., *Dear Sister. Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Asunción Lavrin, “De su puño y letra: Epístolas conventuales.” In *Memoria del Congreso Internacional. El Monacato Femenino en el imperio Español. Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, coord. Manuel Ramos Medina (Mexico: Condumex, 1995) 43–62; “La celda y el siglo: Epístolas conventuales.” In *Mujer y cultura en la colonial Hispanoamericana*, ed. Mabel Moraña (Pittsburgh: Biblioteca de América; Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 1996), 139–59; “La autoridad cuestionada. Epístolas de una crisis,” *Historias* 55 (Mayo-Agosto 2003): 59–69.

40 Asunción Lavrin, “Misión de la historia e historiografía de la Iglesia en el período colonial Americano,” *Historiografía y Bibliografía Americanista, Suplemento del Anuario de Estudios Americanos* (Seville, Spain) 46.2 (1989): 11–54.

41 Miguel de Torres, *Dechado de príncipes eclesiásticos*, 185. The school of Santa Teresa was one of two schools for white girls founded by Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz.

42 Fr. Félix de Jesús María, *Vida y virtudes y dones sobrenaturales de la Ven. Sierva de Dios, Sor María de Jesús, religiosa profesada en el V. monasterio de la Inmaculada Concepción de Puebla de los Angeles en las Indias Occidentales* (Roma: Imprenta de Joseph y Felipe Rossi, 1756). This biography was written to buttress the beatification process of Sor María de Jesús.

43 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 148.

44 Fr. Alonso Franco, *Segunda parte de la Historia de la Provincia de Santiago de Mexico, Orden de Predicadores en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1900); Fr. Agustín de Vetancurt, *Menologio Franciscano*. In *Teatro Mexicano* (Mexico: Doña Maria de Benavides, Viuda de Juan de Ribera, 1698 [1697]). See also Manuel Ramos Medina, “Los cronistas de monjas: La tradición masculina de una experiencia ajena.” In *Historia de la literatura Mexicana*, Vol. 2, *La cultura letrada en la Nueva España del siglo XVII*, coord. Raquel Chang-Rodríguez (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002), 411–28.

45 Elías Trabulse, “Presentación de la Obra,” Prologue to Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, x.

46 Kathleen Ross, *The Baroque Narrative of Carlos Sigüenza y Gongora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 77–78, 107, 127–29.

47 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, passim.

48 Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 399. Writing about Bernarda de San Juan, he said she had “such a superior talent that it seemed to exceed, by far, the limits of a woman;” Asunción Lavrin, “Espiritualidad en el claustro novohispano del siglo XVII,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 4.2 (1995): 155–79.

49 Citation from Fr. Luis Tineo de Morales. In Aureliano Tapia Méndez, *Inundación castálida*, 17.

50 For the model wife in a model household, see Fr. Luis de León, *La perfecta casada* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1970). A stern vision of the virtuous woman in the sixteenth century is that of Luis Vives [1555], *La formación de la mujer cristiana* (Valencia: Ayuntamiento de Valencia, 1994).

51 Fr. Miguel de Torres, *Vida ejemplar y muerte preciosa de la Madre Bárbara Josepha de San Francisco* (Mexico: Herederos de la Vda. de Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1725). Her confessor provided Fr. Miguel information about her life that he knew through confession and her writings. Of the latter, there are no traces.

52 Kathleen Ross, *The Baroque Narrative*, passim.

53 Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*; Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

54 Kristine Ibsen, *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography in Colonial Spanish America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

55 Kathleen Ann Myers, “La influencia mediativa del clero en las vidas de religiosos y monjas.” In *Sor Juana y su mundo: Una mirada actual. Memorias del Congreso Internacional*, coord. Carmen Beatriz López-Portillo (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana/ UNESCO/ Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), 341–53.

56 The nuns of Santa Mónica, in Puebla, began to keep their own archive immediately after their opening in 1686. See Fr. Miguel de Torres, *Dechado de príncipes eclesiásticos*, 224.

57 See Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, 343–46, 363–74.

58 Gómez de la Parra, *Fundación y primero siglo*, 49, 94, 105, 108–9, 113, 116–17, 120, 160, 176, 193 195–96, 228, 255, 258, 265. These nuns were:

Micaela de Santiago, Melchora de la Asunción, Francisca de la Natividad, Luisa de San Nicolás, Juana de Jesús María, Francisca del Espíritu Santo, Isabel de Santa Gertrudis, María de Cristo, María de Santa Teresa, Juana de San Bernardo, and Nicolasa de la Santísima Trinidad. These names may not exhaust the list of nun-chroniclers in this convent. See also Rosalva Loreto López, “Escrito por ella misma. Vida de la Madre Francisca de la Natividad.” In *Monjas y beatas*, 24–66. Josefina Muriel cites the historical manuscripts of Inés de la Cruz, Josefa de la Concepción, Margarita de San Bernardo, María Bárbara de la Concepción, María Rosa de Jesús Sacramentado, Mariana de la Encarnación and others, who either wrote biographies of their sisters in religion or accounts of the foundation of their convents. See Muriel, *Cultura femenina*, 508–9.

⁵⁹ Fr. Agustín de la Madre de Dios, *Tesoro escondido*, 300, 306, 308. On the other hand, he stressed her fasts, charity, humility, and other religious virtues. See also 387–88 and 401 for other sources such as the writings of Inés de la Cruz and information passed on by confessors. For the foundational chronicles of Sor Inés de la Cruz and Mariana de la Encarnación, see Manuel Ramos, *Místicas y descalzas. Fundaciones femeninas Carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Condumex, 1997), 313–69.

⁶⁰ Rosalva Loreto López, “Escrito por ella misma.” In *Monjas y beatas*, 24–66. My review is based on her work.

⁶¹ Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida. Hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (Mexico: UNAM/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), 165–201.

⁶² Sor María Teresa, *Carta de la Rda. M. en que da noticias de las virtudes que en su vida ejerció Sor María de Santa Leocadia* (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1734).

⁶³ Joachina María de Zavaleta, *Copia de la carta que la M.R.M. Joachina María de Zavaleta, . . . escribe a las M.R.R.M.M. preladas de los demás monasterios, dándoles noticias de las heroicas virtudes, y dichosa muerte de la M.R.M. Augustina Nicolasa María de los Dolores Muñoz y Sandoval* (Mexico: Imprenta Nueva de la Bibliotheca Mexicana, 1755).

⁶⁴ The religious chronicles of the eighteenth century moved geographically north to the new evangelizing fields. However, it is possible that examples of well-established institutions remain undiscovered. Recently, Mónica Díaz has rediscovered some biographical notes of the nuns of Corpus Christi. See Mónica Díaz, “Género, Raza y Género Literario en los conventos para mujeres indígenas en el México Colonial,” Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2002, and “The Indigenous Nuns of Corpus Christi: Race and Spirituality.” In *Religion in New Spain*, ed. Susan Schroeder and Stafford Poole (Albuquerque; University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 179–192.

⁶⁵ *Relación histórica de la fundación de este convento de Nuestra Señora del Pilar, Compañía de María llamado vulgarmente La Enseñanza en esta ciudad de Mexico y compendio de la vida y virtudes de N.M.R. M. María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz, su fundadora y patrona* (Mexico: Felipe Zúñiga de Ontiveros, 1793).

⁶⁶ Anne Sofie Sifvert, “Crónica de las monjas brígidas de la ciudad de Mexico,” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Stockholm, 1992.

⁶⁷ A full-fledged history of the family and the foundation is in Pilar Foz y Foz, *La revolución pedagógica en Nueva España (1754–1820)*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Instituto “Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo” (C.S.I.C.), 1981).

⁶⁸ Josefina Muriel, *Cultura femenina novohispana*, 85–91. The original is not easily accessible.

⁶⁹ GN, BN, Leg. 101, exp. 3, 4, 5 (1672). Autos de las visita de D. Fr. Payo de Ribera, Arzobispo de Mexico. That same year Fr. Payo visited La Concepción, Regina Coeli and Jesús María. In these convents the singers received between 20 and 42 pesos, but this sum was divided among them. There is no information as to how many singers shared this small token of recognition.

⁷⁰ Sara Poot Herrera, “Cien años de “teatralidad.” In Raquel Chang-Rodríguez, coord., *La cultura letrada en la Nueva España del siglo XVII*, Vol. 2 of Beatriz Garza Cuarón, coord., *Historia de la literatura mexicana desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días* (Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002), 226–27.

⁷¹ AGI, BN, Leg. 101, exp. 3. Some confessors acknowledged the performance of comedies in the convents and did not condemn them. See Andrés de Borda’s opinion in his *Práctica de Confesores de Monjas*. In María Dolores Bravo Arriaga, “Doble efecto en un texto normativo, *Práctica de Confesores de Monjas 1708*.” In *Religión, Poder y Autoridad en la Nueva España*, ed. Alicia Mayer and Ernesto de la Torre Villar (Mexico: UNAM, 2004), 143–156.

⁷² Sara Poot Herrera, “Cien años,” 215–16, 223. See also Mauricio Beuchot, “Los autos de Sor Juana: Tres lugares teológicos.” In *Sor Juana y su mundo. Una mirada actual*, ed. Sara Poot Herrera (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana, 1995), 353–92.

⁷³ “Coloquio de las madres Capuchinas de esta Corte de Mexico, en que muestran su gratitud al Sor. Dr. Dn. Cayetano de Torres, cuyo assunto y metro, adentro se verá, y gustará el lector de su dulzura, y doctrina,” Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Ms. 21.408–5.

⁷⁴ AINAH, Cayetano Antonio de Torres, Directorio para las novicias de este convento de S. Felipe de Jesús y Pobres Capuchinas de Mexico, Ms., no date. Torres died in 1787.

⁷⁵ An intriguing question is raised by the “gender” of these dramatis personae. *Recelo* (Suspicion) and *Buen Consejo* (Good Counsel) are masculine, as well as the Indian appearing at the end. If the performers were nuns, the issue is whether they were dressed as men, especially in the case of the Indian.

⁷⁶ Coloquio que compuso la R.M. María Vicenta de la Encarnación para la profesión de su discípula la hermana María de San Eliseo, Carmelita descalza en el convento de Santa Teresa la Antigua, año de 1894. UT, NLBC, G312.

77 María de San José has been extensively studied by Kathleen Myers, and María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio by Jennifer Eich. Kristine Ibsen has focused on the autobiographies of several nuns. For Jean Franco, see note 53.

78 Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Las Moradas. Libro de su vida* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, S.A., 1979), 66. “And you will see what His Majesty does to achieve this marriage, that I understand must be when he gives ecstasies (*arrobamientos*) that take her [the soul] out of her senses.” She devotes several passages of the *Libro de su vida* and *Las Moradas* to explain the nature of mystic union. See, especially, *Moradas Sextas*.

79 Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena, UT, NLBC Ms. See also Asunción Lavrin, “La Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio y su mundo visionario,” *Signos Históricos*, No. 13 (Enero-Junio 2005): 22–41. See chapter 3 for a brief survey of her visions.

80 Fr. Luis de Granada, *Obras Completas*, 10 vols., edited and with an introductory study by Alvaro Hueriga. Vol. 1, *Libro de la Oración y Meditación* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española y Dominicos de Andalucía, 1994), 469 and following. Luis de Granada was born in 1508 and died in 1588, just a couple of years before María Magdalena’s profession.

81 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la S.S. Trinidad, Cartas, fols. 4, 55, 113, 117, 167–68.

82 See Chapter 8.

83 BN, FF, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la S.S. Trinidad, Cartas. Scribes signed their names at the end of their copying task. Among them were Fr. Joseph Antonio Méndez, Fr. Lorenzo de Rueda, and Fr. Gabriel de Saravia.

84 This text could be analyzed from the viewpoint of its potential transformation from a personal account into a hagiographical text by reading the marginal notes as the path from the former to the latter.

85 Fr. Ignacio Saldaña, *La paloma penitente o gemebunda Maya. Sermón fúnebre en las exequias que el observantísimo convento de San Juan de la Penitencia de Mexico hizo a su amada hija . . . Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad . . .* (Mexico: Imp. de la Bibliotheca Mexicana, 1758). It was customary to preach a sermon on the first anniversary of the person’s death. The printing was paid by Sor Sebastiana’s brother, Fr. Miguel Joseph de Maya, a Franciscan friar. See Joseph Eugenio Valdés, *Vida admirable y penitente de la V.M. Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la S.S. Trinidad religiosa de coro y velo negro en el religiosísimo convento de . . . San Juan de la Penitencia de esta ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico: Bibliotheca Mexicana, 1765).

86 BN, FF, Mexico, Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la Santísima Trinidad, Cartas, fols. 167, 312, 350.

87 Ibid., fols. 336–339

88 Ibid., fols. 36, 164, 213, 361, 347.

89 Ibid., fol. 240. Sebastiana mentions the writings of María la Antigua as one of her readings in fol. 156.

90 Kristine Ibsen, *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography*, 85–96.

91 BN, FF Sor Sebastiana Josepha de la S.S. Trinidad, Cartas, fols. 20, 40, 47, 51, 156–57, 164, 231–32, 329–30, 350–51, 355.

92 Ibid., fols. 141, 348, as examples.

93 Ibid., fol. 164.

94 Ibid., fols. 98, 326.

95 LC, Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary. See chapter 3, note 136.

96 Sor Maria de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fols. 14v, 56v, 61–61v.

97 Ellen Gunnarsdottir, “Una monja barroca en el Mexico ilustrado.” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Diálogos espirituales*, 362–83.

98 Asunción Lavrin, “La escritura desde un mundo oculto: Espiritualidad y anonimidad en el convento de San Juan de la Penitencia,” *Estudios de Historia Novohispana* 22 (2000): 49–75, and “Sor María de Jesús Felipa: Un diario espiritual de mediados del siglo XVIII (1758).” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Monjas y beatas*, 111–60.

99 Sor María de Jesús Felipa, Diary, fol. 125. She uses the word “algodones” (cotton) that I translate to mean the soft feel of good bedding materials.

100 Ibid., fols. 43–44. For spiritual battles, see fol. 59v.

101 Ibid., fol. 228.

102 Ibid., fol. 111v–12. “El Señor se ajusta a vuestro sexo y sólo os pone preciso aquel lumen en que se conozca esa obra suya.”

103 Ibid., fol. 90.

104 Ibid., fol. 105v.

- 105 Ibid., fol. 121v.
- 106 Ibid., fol. 109.
- 107 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, religiosa Capuchina del convento de Querétaro, copiada por una religiosa brígida en 1844, Ms.; Asunción Lavrin, “La Madre María Marcela, Capuchina Queretana.” In Lavrin and Loreto López, *Diálogos espirituales*, 74–116.
- 108 Kristine Ibsen, *Women’s Spiritual Autobiography*, 62–67.
- 109 AGN, Inquisición, Caja 179, carpeta 1780–99. I am grateful to Prof. María Agueda Méndez for helping me to secure this expediente. No copies of this biography have been unearthed so far. In the late eighteenth century, handwritten copies of nuns’ lives were still a means of making their deeds known among their sisters in religion.
- 110 BN Mexico, Vida de la Madre María Marcela, fol. 124. Her other confessor was Diego de Segovia. Both were secular priests. She felt secure under their directions and confident that her spiritual life was fully orthodox. Hereafter cited as Vida.
- 111 Madre María Marcela, Vida, fol. 221.
- 112 Ibid., fol. 218.
- 113 Ibid., fol. 125.
- 114 Ibid., fol. 161.
- 115 Jennifer Eich, *The Other Mexican Muse. Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio (1695–1756)* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2004). See Eich’s Bibliography, 255–56, for a complete list of her works. Some of them were attached to her biography by Joseph Bellido, and published in 1758. However, her first devotional work was published in 1746. See María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, *Modo de hacer los oficios de obediencia con aprovechamiento espiritual* (Mexico: Imprenta Real del Superior Gobierno y del Nuevo Rezado de Doña María de Rivera, 1746). I am in debt to Jennifer Eich and Manuel Ramos Medina for having provided me with copies of her works.
- 116 See Chapter 6 for her details on her health and funeral.
- 117 Fr. Joseph Bellido, S.J., *Vida de la M.R.M. María Anna Agueda de S. Ignacio, primera priora del religiosísimo convento de Dominicas recoletas de Santa Rosa de la Puebla de los Angeles compuesta por el P. Joseph Bellido de la Sagrada Compañía de Jesús. La saca a la luz el Illmo. Sr. Dr. D. Domingo Pantaleón Alvarez de Abreu, Arzobispo de la Isla de Santo Domingo y dignísimo Obispo de la ciudad de la Puebla de los Angeles en el Reyno de Mexico* (Mexico: Imprenta de la Biblioteca Mexicana, 1758), passim.
- 118 Bellido, *Vida*, 71, 75.
- 119 Bellido, *Vida*, 80; María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, *Modo de hacer los oficios de obediencia*, passim.
- 120 Fr. Juan de Villa Sánchez, *Justas y debidas honras que hicieron y hacen sus propias obras a la M.R.M. Maria Anna Agueda de San Ignacio . . . en las exequias que hizo el Illmo. Sr. Dr. Don Domingo Pantaleón Alvarez de Abreu* (Mexico: Reimpreso en la Imprenta de la Biblioteca Americana, no date).
- 121 Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, *Medidas del Alma con Christo*. In Bellido, *Vida*, 289.
- 122 Ibid., 226–49.
- 123 See Bellido, *Vida*, 243, 302.
- 124 Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, *Medidas del Alma*, 226 and passim. She uses the expression *entendí* (I understood or comprehended) very frequently, to convey the process whereby she understood Christ’s words.
- 125 Eich, *The Other Mexican Muse*, 146, 155–46, 173–85, 197–221.
- 126 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 269–70, illustrations 14, 18, and 19.
- 127 Bellido, *Vida*, 350–410. This appears as *Libro Quarto* of her works.
- 128 Fr. Luis de León, *La perfecta casada. Cantar de los cantares. Poesías originales* . (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1970), 11–80.
- 129 BN Madrid, Los Puntos de la regla que han de guardar las sorores del convento de N.P.S. Bernardo de Mexico, Ms. (1744).
- 130 María Dolores Bravo Arriaga, “La excepción y la regla: Una monja según el discurso oficial y según Sor Juana.” In Herrera, *Y diversa de mí misma entre vuestras plumas ando*, 35–41.
- 131 Marie-Cécile Bénassy-Berling, “La religión de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.” In *Sor Juana y su mundo*, coord. Carmen Beatriz López-Portillo (Mexico: Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juan/UNESCO/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), 34–38; George H. Tavard, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty. The First Mexican Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University, 1991).

[132](#) Sara Poot Herrera “Cien años de ‘teatralidad,’ ” 215.

[133](#) See a variety of analytical works on Sor Juana in López-Portillo, coord., *Sor Juana y su mundo*.

[134](#) Ildefonso Mariano del Río, *Sermón que en las honras cabo del año que hizo el convento de Ntra. Madre Santa Clara de la Puebla el día 20 de Febrero de 1727 a la venerable Madre Augustina de San Diego* (Mexico: Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1728), no pagination. “Todo a fin de responder y corresponder a nuestro Phoenix poetisa la M. Juana Inés de la Cruz, con quien avia [*sic*] pactado valdíos amores de por fe; que sólo este intento prueba la valentía y vivacidad de su ingenio.” I thank Prof. Elias Rivers for translating this passage.

[135](#) Del Río, *Sermón*. The Spanish and Latin quotes are: “Augustina, no te importe saber más de lo que te importa. Non plus sapere quam oportet sapere.”

[136](#) Elías Trabulse, “Los años finales de Sor Juana: Una interpretación (1688–1695). In López-Portillo, *Sor Juana y su mundo*, 25–38. See also Asunción Lavrin, “Unlike Sor Juana? The Model Nun in the Religious Literature of Colonial Mexico,” *University of Dayton Review* 16.2 (Spring 1983): 75–92, reissued in Stephanie Merrim, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 61–85, and “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Obediencia y autoridad en su entorno religioso,” *Revista Iberoamericana*, Nos. 172–73 (Julio-Diciembre 1995): 602–22.

[137](#) Marta V. Vicente and Luis R. Corteguera, eds., *Women, Texts and Authority in the Early Modern Spanish World* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003). See essays by Alison Weber and Sherry Velasco in this collection for comments on the authority of nuns’ texts and the role of confessors in the crafting of the biographies and autobiographies.

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